Peter declares in the New Testament: “Do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering…. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ. . . . If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. . . . If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name” (1 Peter 4:12-16).* He adds: “Those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good” (verse 19).

British Christian scholar Dr. Melvin Tinker points out in his book Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People? that Peter wrote those words at a time when Christians were being subjected to violent, life-threatening, deadly persecution. Tinker reminds us that “it was the practice of Nero to dip Christians in tar and set them alight to illumine his garden parties. There was also the business of throwing them to wild dogs, heating them on grid irons, and burning them at the stake.” He adds: “More subtle forms of persecution involved barring them from obtaining employment, which in turn meant they could not pay their bills, which in turn led to confiscation of property, and when that was exhausted, imprisonment for debt.”

According to Jeff King, president of International Christian Concern, Christians today are suffering a persecution similar to that suffered by the earliest Christians: “Most Christians in the U.S. are unaware of the horrendous suffering that fellow believers in the world are experiencing. . . . Native pastors and evangelists in countries such as Cuba, Vietnam, and China often work under the threat of arrest, imprisonment, and sometimes death.”

For example, in Pakistan a 9-year-old girl was called an infidel because she converted to Christianity; she was abducted and found bleeding after being tied, beaten viciously with a bat, raped, and sexually abused. In Indonesia, a Christian church and 20 homes owned by Christians were burned and destroyed; 12 Christians were murdered, including a 9-month-old baby and a 3-year-old girl and her mother. Also, in Indonesia, a young Christian mother was kidnapped along with her 10-year-old daughter. Her Christian son and in-laws were murdered, and she was forced to marry a man and have his baby.

In this painting entitled In the Beginning Was the Word, Hermann Otto Hoyer, ca. 1937, a quasi-messianic Hitler is depicted mesmerizing an audience with his oratory.

As social activists Kay Strom and Michele Rickett make clear in their book Forgotten Girls, persecution of Christians around the world is alive and well. Indeed, “over the past decade, the persecution of Indian Christians by extremist Hindu groups has steadily increased. Many churches have been burned, and pastors and other Christian leaders attacked, even killed. Terrified believers hide in the forests until hunger and thirst overcome their terror.” Moreover, “in Somalia, East Africa . . . Christians have been killed, driven out, or pushed far underground. In the entire world, the number of Somali Christians is believed to be no more than 2,000.” Perhaps one of the most horrifying and terrifying examples of persecution of Christians occurred when Adolf Hitler ruled Germany. Hitler and his disciples had elevated him (Hitler) into a false god, and they refused to let anyone
Hitler ruled Germany. Hitler and his disciples had elevated him (Hitler) into a false god, and they refused to let anyone acknowledge/serve any other god before him. Consequently, Hitler ordered his fanatic disciples and apostles to hound, harass, persecute, torture, and even kill those who believed that Jesus Christ, not Adolf Hitler, was their Savior.

Likewise, in Communist China, disciples and apostles of Chairman Mao elevated him into a false god. Schoolchildren were forced to memorize Chairman Mao’s sayings and even to sing songs in praise of the mad dictator who murdered millions of his own people, even in his paranoia killing many of his most fervent supporters. Today in Communist China, Christians who insist they must serve, obey, and worship God and Jesus Christ rather than Mao are being ruthlessly spied upon, hounded, harassed, persecuted, tortured, and murdered.

Bobby Jue, a Christian businessman in Hollandale, Mississippi, and an official of the Chinese Christian Mission in Greenville, Mississippi, sadly observes: “There’s no doubt there’s very little religious freedom in Communist China today. Christians in China are being persecuted and being treated as second-class citizens.” The New Testament speaks to this issue of religious persecution; indeed, it tells us: “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness” (Matthew 5:10). “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12). Christ Himself said: “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you” (John 15:18, 19).

As Catholic scholar Russell Shaw points out in his book Does Suffering Make Sense? “The suffering associated with persecution has been linked to Christianity in a special way, viewed as a kind of hallmark of the Christian and of Christian life. . . . Those who set out resolutely to follow Jesus Christ are bound, it seems, to come into conflict sooner or later with the forces of evil in the world; if they respond as Jesus did—seeking to overcome evil by suffering it with confidence in God, rather than fighting it with evil of their own—they are bound also to experience persecution in some form.”

Haven Bradford Gow is a television and radio commentator and writer who teaches religion to children at Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Greenville, Mississippi.


**Author:** Haven Bradford Gow
The Reformation and Wars of Religion

Published in the May/June 2010 Magazine by David J. B. Trim

Starting in the 1520s international relations between the rising European states were dominated by conflicts that were primarily or significantly religious in character: wars in central and southern Europe, between Christians and Muslims; and, in central and northwestern Europe, confessional wars, the fruit of the Reformation. The division between Protestant and Catholic caused or intensified numerous conflicts, resulting in some of the longest lasting, bloodiest, and most bitterly contested and destructive wars in history. This second in a five-part series of articles on Europe's wars of religion tells the story of the confessional wars in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Christendom. The next article will consider what conclusions and lessons can be drawn from the narrative that follows. The fourth article will briefly recount the history of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century wars against Islam, before the last article in the series examines the end of the era of wars of religion.

Germany, 1524–1535

In 1524–1525 peasants rose in revolt across southern and western Germany, inflamed by the version of the Lutheran Reformation preached by Thomas Müntzer, who had been one of Martin Luther's early followers but had been banished for his radicalism and militancy. Some of the peasants' demands were socioeconomic, but all derived from the belief that the whole of human society, rather than just theology and the church, ought to be remade in accordance with biblical principles and the law of God. In a sense, the Peasants' War (as the resulting conflict was called) was the first of the post-Reformation wars of religion. Yet it was unusual, in that Luther condemned the peasants and the war ended with the slaughter of peasants by both Lutheran and Catholic armies.

In 1524–1525 peasants rose in revolt across southern and western Germany, inflamed by the version of the Lutheran Reformation preached by Thomas Müntzer, who had been one of Martin Luther's early followers but had been banished for his radicalism and militancy. Some of the peasants' demands were socioeconomic, but all derived from the belief that the whole of human society, rather than just theology and the church, ought to be remade in accordance with biblical principles and the law of God. In a sense, the Peasants' War (as the resulting conflict was called) was the first of the post-Reformation wars of religion. Yet it was unusual, in that Luther condemned the peasants and the war ended with the slaughter of peasants by both Lutheran and Catholic armies.

There was another outbreak of radical, lower-order Protestant violence in Müntzer in 1534–1535, in which the ruling bishop was deposed by Anabaptists, who then established their own “kingdom,” led by Jan of Leiden, who proclaimed himself the messiah. He maintained his authority by imprisoning and killing those who doubted him, but was able to command enough support from the supposedly pacifist Anabaptists to keep the bishop and Catholic armies at bay for 18 months. On the city’s fall he and most of his followers were put to the sword.
Thereafter, however, in religious civil wars there was fighting within and among both the aristocracy and the peasants, rather than nobles fighting commoners. Societies were polarized along confessional lines.

**Switzerland**

In Zurich, a constituent canton of the Swiss Confederation, the burgomaster and city council had imposed a reorganization of the church in 1523, which was inspired and its implementation led by Huldrych Zwingli. The emergence of what became known as Protestantism in Zurich split the Swiss Confederation, however, and in 1529 and 1531 the Zwinglian and Catholic cantons clashed in the first and second wars of Kappel. Zurich had the worst of the Second War of Kappel, in which Zwingli, the second great leader of the Reformation, was killed in battle; but later in the century the survival of the Reformation in the Protestant cantons of Switzerland was ensured by the strength of the armies of Bern and Zurich. The cities used this military power to impose Protestantism on, or preserve it in, other cities and cantons, notably Geneva, Lausanne, the Pays de Vaud, and Mulhouse.

**Germany 1546–1555: The Schmalkaldic Wars**

Meanwhile in Germany, Lutheran princes and cities established a defensive alliance, the League of Schmalkalden, in 1531 to protect individual territories from attack by the emperor, Charles V. But in practice the league aided Lutherans in other states, thereby helping to spread Lutheranism by force throughout northern Germany. Eventually, in 1546, open war between the emperor and the league broke out. The Schmalkaldic War is usually said to have lasted only until 1547, when on April 24 the emperor won a celebrated victory at the Battle of Mühlberg, which he hoped would be a springboard to end religious conflict in the empire. Lutheranism was, however, now too strongly entrenched for one victory to make a decisive difference; hostilities continued in Germany until 1552. The confessional nature of this war is clouded, because Maurice of Saxony and other Lutheran princes fought for the emperor, and the political relationship of the princes and free cities of the empire vis-à-vis the emperor was one of the issues at stake. Yet there is no question that confessional divisions were a major factor both in causing and in perpetuating the wars of the 1540s and 1550s.

In the end an uneasy peace returned to the empire thanks to a compromise and peace treaty concluded at Augsburg in 1555. It agreed a principle famously summed up in the Latin tag *cuius regio, eius religio* (“whose reign, that religion,” i.e., “in the prince’s land, the prince’s religion”). This provided that the confessional affiliation of each territory in the empire, whether princely state or free city, was to be determined by its ruler: usually the prince, but in city-states, the ruling council. The prince would choose his confession, Protestant or Catholic, and that would set the official religion for all his subjects. Once a ruler’s religious views had been decided and announced, those of his subjects whose allegiance lay with a different confession had a limited time period in which they had to either migrate to a state whose official religion was in line with their own, or conform—if they failed to do either, then they could be subjected to persecution, imprisonment, fines, or execution, and no neighboring state would intervene.

This doctrine of ecclesiastical territoriality could not be more at odds with notions of religious freedom—all confessions, Catholics and Protestants, conceded the right to impose the faith of the government upon the governed. Probably neither Protestant nor Catholic expected the Augsburg compromise to last, but in fact it was not until the outbreak of the Thirty Years’ War in 1618 that it was challenged; and once the war ended, with the Peace of Westphalia (1648), the doctrine was largely (albeit, as we shall see, not totally) restored.

*Rivalz, Antoine (1667-1735)*

The expulsion of the Huguenots from Toulouse after the siege of the town by troops of the Prince de Conde, 1562.

**The Reformed Churches—Militant Protestantism**

A new strain of Protestantism was to make the European wars of religion more widespread and more bitterly fought. Calvinism emerged in Geneva in the 1540s, preserved from its Catholic neighbors chiefly by Bern’s military strength. Genevan Calvinism fused with the reformation of Zurich and northern Switzerland, which had been led by Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger, to produce what became known as Reformed (with a capital R) Protestantism. It has generally been referred to simply as “Calvinism,” and
its adherents (called Puritans in England and North America, Huguenots in France, and Presbyterians in Scotland) simply “Calvinists.” However, recent research by historians has revealed that this underestimates other Swiss influences on Reformed thought and practice, especially that of Zwingli and Bullinger, though on the other hand, the recent scholarly tendency to prefer “Reformed” over “Calvinist” fails to do justice to Calvin’s role in taking the ideas and practices of other Swiss Reformers and shaping (or reshaping) them into a cohesive, intellectually powerful, appealing, and militant whole.

Reformed theology and ecclesiology were such that Calvinism was in some ways a confession made for war. Many of its adherents were remarkably militant, and its organizational structure itself led to militarization. The distinctively Reformed doctrine of predestination and the Reformed version of the doctrine of the church meant that wherever there were members of God’s elect, predestined to salvation, there also must be the Reformed Church, an institution and organization. Unlike Lutherans, therefore, the Reformed could have no truck with the ecclesiastical territoriality that had ended religious war in Germany.

For Calvinists liberty of conscience had to be matched by liberty of worship. They also, collectively, had a formidable sense of group identity that transcended earthly ethnic and national identities. One branch of the Reformed Church in danger was likely to receive financial and military help from the other branches, thus internationalizing wars in which the Reformed were engaged.

In addition, even more than other Protestants, the Reformed viewed the world through an apocalyptic lens. The Papacy did not merely have the characteristics of antichrist; it was not merely a type of antichrist; it really was the antichrist. Further, like most exegesis of Daniel and Revelation, they were postmillennialists—that is, they believed Christ's second coming would follow, rather than precede, the millennium, which might be inaugurated partly by the actions of God’s elect on earth. This, combined with other doctrines, helped to produce an extraordinary boldness and defiance in the face of adversity—for God could turn even the darkest situation into triumph, and because those whom the Reformed were fighting were enemies in a cosmic, not merely a human, sense.

Finally, Reformed ecclesiology was also distinctive, and was based around a pyramidal, partly representative organizational structure, which could be easily mobilized. Local churches were readily turned into companies, with the consistory (the quintessentially Reformed body governing each local church) taking a leading role; the equally Calvinist regional authorities—synods, colloquies, or classes—then helped turn the companies of their region into regiments.

All this must be borne in mind when considering the extraordinary extent, duration, bitterness, and bloodiness of the wars that raged across France, the Low Countries, the British Isles, and Germany in the 90 years after 1560.

**The French Wars of Religion, 1562–1629**

Disputes about the place of an organized and powerful Reformed minority (the Huguenots) in what was a Catholic state resulted in France being racked by nearly 40 years of confessional conflict in the late sixteenth century. There were nine nationwide civil wars, the guerres de religion, which incorporated 21 years of formal warfare between March 1562 and April 1598. Informal violence was endemic even in some years of nominal peace—in the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre in Paris in August 1572, some 3,000 Huguenots were slaughtered, and probably another 7,000 were slain in a dozen massacres that followed in provincial cities across France.²

In the seventeenth century, further localized but serious wars followed periodically from 1612 to 1629. English, German, Scottish, Dutch, and Swiss troops aided the Huguenots; Spanish, Italian, German, and Swiss troops aided the Catholics.

The Dutch navy battles a Spanish fleet at Gibraltar. *Painting by Corelis Claesz van Wieringen.*

**The Dutch Revolt, 1567–1648**

In the Netherlands an unsuccessful revolt in 1567–1568 against the plans of the Spanish ruler, Philip II, for governmental and ecclesiastical reform gave way to guerrilla warfare on land and sea by Calvinist diehards, before a
further revolt in the spring of 1572 triggered 37 years of constant warfare, followed by a 12-year truce with Spain, followed by renewed hostilities from 1621 to 1648: what the Dutch, slightly misleadingly, later called the Eighty Years’ War. Not all the Dutch rebels against Spain were Calvinists—they included Lutherans, Anabaptists, and members of smaller radical Protestant sects, such as the Family of Love, as well as Jews and some Roman Catholics. The Revolt of the Netherlands had political and economic, as well as confessional, objectives.

However, the Reformed, by their willingness to defy the military logic of their situation in the 1570s, provided the motor for the revolt; and it was religion that made the war last so long. In the first 40 years both sides were ultimately willing to compromise on everything that divided them except for religion. The only religious liberty Spain would concede was a period of grace in which recalcitrant Protestants could make arrangements to emigrate. Even those Netherlanders who were not fighting for religion would not doom their neighbors to such a fate. By the seventeenth century the Reformed Church was effectively the state church of the Netherlands; the Reformed agenda drove national policy. This meant that foreign Reformed communities aided their fellow Calvinists. At various times England, Scotland, France, and the Protestant German princes were open allies of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, and many English, Scottish, and Huguenot soldiers served the Dutch cause as volunteers, even when their governments were formally at peace with Spain.

The Thirty Years’ War, 1618–1648

The Thirty Years’ War was triggered by Calvinists. Bohemian Calvinists resisted attempts by Ferdinand II, archduke of Austria, Holy Roman Emperor, and elector of Bohemia, to restrict religious freedoms (already limited!) dating back to the Hussite wars of the 1430s (discussed in the previous article in this series). Their unwillingness to accept religious persecution led the Bohemians to declare Ferdinand deposed; they invited the elector palatine, perhaps the most important Calvinist German prince, to take the Bohemian throne from its Habsburg incumbent. However, the war involved more than Calvinist-Catholic religious differences; the peace established at Augsburg had become increasingly uneasy.

By 1618 Ferdinand II, who had been educated by Jesuits, seems genuinely to have believed that by force of arms he could overturn the Lutheran Reformation. It must be added that the reputation of Jesuits in Protestant historiography is mostly undeserved—but not wholly. They were far more earnest and sincere missionaries and preachers of Jesus than they were Machiavellian conspirators or “storm troopers of the Counter-Reformation”—yet they could be unyielding and aggressive opponents of Protestantism. It is remarkable that both Sebastian I of Portugal and Emperor Ferdinand II were educated by Jesuits and both as adults firmly opposed any form of compromise with enemies of the faith, whose influence they sought to overturn by force of arms. Sebastian’s 1578 “crusade” against Muslims in Morocco (discussed in the next article in this series) ruined Portugal; Ferdinand’s policies brought about the Thirty Years’ War—“Europe’s tragedy,” as a recent authoritative history calls it.3

Ferdinand provoked the Bohemian Revolt by reversing policies of limited toleration, thus helping to spread and to prolong the Thirty Years’ War. First, he vindictively conquered the elector palatine’s Rhineland principality, then annexed the imperial electorate that went with it, thus changing the balance of power within the empire. Second, in 1629 he issued the Edict of Restitution, which aimed to turn the religious clock back to 1552—a date carefully chosen, instead of 1555 (when the Peace of Augsburg was agreed), because it was the height of Charles V’s successes in the Schmalkaldic Wars. Protestants had been divided, but the danger posed by Ferdinand’s ambitions was so obvious that gradually the war spread: it became general across Germany in the 1620s, then encompassed the Lutheran kingdoms of Denmark-Norway and Sweden, and subsumed the second half of the Eighty Years’ War between Spain and the Dutch Republic.

The religious character of the Thirty Years’ War eventually was diminished, particularly by the entrance of Catholic France on the Protestant side in the early 1630s. The result was that for much of the second half of the war it was as much about rivalry between France and the Habsburg rulers of Austria and Spain, and about the politics of the empire, as about the Protestant-Catholic divide. However, the war was both started and prolonged by confessional rivalry; and confessional hatred helped make it so destructive of both human life and property that it was probably the greatest disaster to affect Europe between the Black Death and the First World War.

In the end, the Peace of Westphalia, which ended the war in 1648, endorsed the cuius regio, eius religio principle of Augsburg and effectively tried to apply it not only to the empire but also to international relations in general. The rights of some religious minorities were recognized and protected, which was a major step forward; but on the whole, the
sovereigns of Europe agreed that the internal affairs of other states were the business of only the sovereigns of those states, who were permitted to persecute dissenters and dissidents as they saw fit.

The British Isles and Europe, 1560–1651

In Scotland, Presbyterian determination to resist Catholic oppression resulted in a civil war in 1560, and a coup that overthrew the sovereign in the late 1560s. Three English invasions followed, initially to ensure liberty of conscience and worship for Protestants, later to maintain a Protestant government—all this in just 14 years, from 1560 through 1573.

After intervening in the affairs of her Scottish neighbor, Elizabeth I of England fought Catholic Spain from 1585 to 1603. The Spanish attempt to invade England in 1588, with the great fleet known as the Spanish Armada, is the best-known event of this war, but it lasted 19 years and was bitterly fought: English troops saw combat against Spanish forces in the Netherlands, France, Spain, Portugal, Ireland, the Caribbean, and South America. The three British kingdoms were united by the Stuarts, after the Tudor dynasty died out with Elizabeth in 1603; her successor, James I, made peace with Spain in 1604. But his son, Charles I, waged war on Spain again in 1625. The British monarchy then stayed out of the Thirty Years’ War, but royal religious policy provoked resentment among the Reformed of both England and Scotland, and among Ireland’s majority Catholic population.

Confessional divisions eventually helped to spawn the British civil wars that began in 1640 and lasted from 1641 to 1651, wreaking destruction across the whole of the British Isles. Massacres and atrocities were commonplace in Ireland, but were not unknown in England, Wales, and Scotland. The wars ended with the so-called Puritan Revolution, which (briefly) abolished the monarchy and established a British republic, under the leadership of the fervent Calvinist Oliver Cromwell.

Thus, from the 1520s until approximately 1650 the greatest nations in Christendom—France, Spain, Portugal, Austria, Sweden, the Dutch Republic, and Britain—were all caught up in wars that were, either in part or in whole, the result of the divisions engendered by the Reformation. The obvious questions are why did the wars last so long and why were they so bitterly contested? These questions will be considered in the next article in this series.

Professor D.J.B. Trim is a historian and member of the Cromwell Society. He writes from London, England. With many years of experience teaching college history, he is currently associated with the University of Reading.


Author: David J. B. Trim
Why the Jews?

Published in the May/June 2010 Magazine
by Elijah Mvundura

Anti-Semitism is a historical enigma. Its origin in pagan antiquity, its evolution through the medieval period, and its demonic denouement in the Holocaust have been explained in many ways. Yet the question still remains: Why the Jews?

By refusing to assimilate, by cleaving to Yahweh even after being conquered and exiled to foreign lands, Jews presented ancient paganism with a radical oddity: a transcendent, stateless, and formless God with an altar separate from the throne. Maybe most odd were His universal claims and sharp enmity against all other gods. “The gods of the pagans were in no sense jealous gods,” Jean-Jacques Rousseau pointed out. “They divided the empire of the world between them.” But Yahweh would have none of it. “I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God” (Isaiah 44:6).* See also Psalms 115:4-8; 135:15-18; Isaiah 47:6, 7.

This sharp polemic against pagan gods or idolatry saturated the message of the Hebrew prophets. Summed up in the Shema, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4), it became, after the Babylonian captivity, the defining element in Jewish spirituality and identity. Henceforth, what the prophets were to Israel the Jews now were to the nations of the world. They were now Yahweh’s potent arsenal in His war against pagan gods. It was not by force of arms, however, that the Jews were to fight this war. “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the Lord Almighty (Zechariah 4:6). The war was to be spiritual and ideological, because Yahweh’s hostility was directed not at pagans but at their gods and pagan vices. Thus to the Gentiles: “Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other” (Isaiah 45:22). But about the gods: “Tell them this: ‘These gods, who did not make the heavens and the earth, will perish from the earth and from under the heavens’” (Jeremiah 10:11).

Pagans took notice and anti-Semitism was born. In antiquity, Jews gained notoriety as “a race remarkable for their contempt for the divine powers.” Not only so, they did not eat with pagans, intermarry with them, or join their civic events. They hated all humanity, pagans charged. They had very weird religious practices: Sabbath observance, circumcision, and abstention from pork. To enter their Temple was to risk death. Indeed, the Maccabean revolt was inspired by Antiochus Epiphanes’ desecration of the Temple. Pagans could not understand such religious zeal. Thus they alleged it was a cover-up for ritual murder, incestuous orgies, cannibalism, and donkey worship in the Temple. The Roman historian Tacitus summed up the pagans’ view of the Jews: “All that we hold sacred is profane to them; all that is licit to them is impure to us.”

This absolute negation of paganism was supposed to generate rejection. Yet ironically by the first century B.C. Jews were gaining so many converts and sympathizers that pagan elites were alarmed. “The customs of this detestable race,” wrote Seneca, “have become so prevalent that they have been adopted in almost all the world. The vanquished have imposed their laws on the conquerors.” This alarm explains why Romans prohibited Jews from proselytizing. It also explains their violent response to aggressive Christian missionary activity. So much for paganism’s religious tolerance lauded by many modern scholars. The truth is pagan Rome tolerated only those cults that did not undermine pax deorum (peace of the gods) and the emperor cult, the two ideological pillars of Roman imperialism.
A group of Jews from Hungary after the arrival at Auschwitz in the summer of 1944.

The conflict between pagan Rome and early Christianity might not seem to feature in the history of anti-Semitism. Yet, not only did pagan Rome persecute early Christians; it also leveled against them exactly the same charges directed at the Jews, such as slander of the gods, donkey worship, misanthropy, ritual murder, cannibalism, and incestuous orgies. These parallels should alert us to how ancient anti-Semitism was a superficial sign of a much broader and deeper conflict—a conflict of religio-cosmic dimensions. At the heart of this conflict was the question of God’s sovereignty over history and human society. And it is a question that the Roman Empire brazenly answered contra Yahweh.

In their drive to maintain a world empire, the Romans put their gods and those of conquered people in a single pantheon. Hence, “paganism became one and the same religion throughout the known world.” But to politically fuse different nations into one world order under the ecumenism of the pagan gods was a brazen attempt to usurp Yahweh’s claim to sovereignty over the universe.

Interestingly, ancient pagans, as Elaine Pagels observed, did agree with their Christian antagonists that pagan gods embodied real elemental forces in the universe. But if pagans revered them as divine patrons, early Christians denounced them as demons. Indeed, the martyrs’ uncompromising fidelity was rooted in their conviction that the Roman Empire was “a home for demons and a haunt for every evil spirit, a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird” (Revelation 18:2).

Based on the spiritual worldview held by ancient pagans and early Christians, a union of the church and the empire meant a compromise between Christ and the powers of darkness. And it is the very bargain—coregency with the devil—that the Gospel account tells us Jesus refused in the desert. Whenever the church has accepted this Faustian bargain, it has been only by detaching Jesus from the intensely jealous God of Israel, whom He claimed as His Father. But if we respect His self-definition as Yahweh’s “exact representation” (Hebrews 1:3), then Jesus’ response to the union of church and empire and the church’s subsequent embrace of pagan beliefs, practices, and philosophy will be identical to Yahweh’s intense hostility to idolatry and religious syncretism in ancient Israel.

To be sure, contrary to some conventional academic wisdom, pagan gods did not die with the “victory of Christianity.” Some were renamed and integrated into the celestial hierarchy as saints. For example, “Cupid became the Angel of the Annunciation, and Minerva the Virgin Mary,” while others survived in medieval mythological lore, art, and literature. Significantly, the survival of the gods was facilitated by the neutering of the apocalyptic worldview, first, by Origen, and then through the “imperial theology” that grew out of the conversion of Constantine. But most influential was Augustine, who interpreted the book of Revelation as a spiritual allegory and shifted from the biblical dualism of good/evil, light/darkness, to the Platonic dualism of body/soul, matter/spirit.

By denaturing and depersonalizing evil, Augustine domesticated the great adversary of the apocalypse. This helped the devil emerge in medieval theology and folklore as a comical figure, at once humorous and monstrous. But as the devil transformed himself into a relatively harmless figure, all his evil attributes came to be fixed on the Jews. Thus they were blamed for all sorts of natural and social disasters that befell medieval society. Depicted in art, Passion plays, and sermons as Christ-killers, sorcerers, witches, and allies of the devil (complete with tails, horns, and other gross features), Jews became in popular imagination identical with the devil himself. This demonic image was fused with that of the antichrist, transforming them into “a gigantic embodiment of anarchic, destructive power.” No wonder then, that in a grotesque parody of God’s end-time destruction of the wicked, thousands of Jews were massacred during the Crusades.

Some have claimed the warrant for this genocidal anti-Semitism is in the New Testament. Yet texts that deny this warrant have been blithely overlooked. For example, in Matthew 13:30 Jesus explicitly warned against annihilating the wicked. “Let both grow together until the harvest” He said. Not only are humans incapable of distinguishing between the good and the evil, the scope of evil is spiritual and cosmic. Only God can eradicate it. That is why Revelation 20:7-15 is very clear that the destruction of the devil and the wicked will be at the same time, at the end-time and by God. In the eschatological parables of the Weeds and of the Net, Jesus is also very specific: His angels will destroy the wicked
“It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord” (Romans 12:19; cf. Hebrews 10:30). Interestingly, knowing the human inclination to usurp prerogatives that belong to God alone, Jesus predicted that “a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God” (John 16:2).

Killing the “wicked” in God’s service is a diabolical paradox, a grotesque distortion of the gospel of love and peace. Yet it is on this distortion that the gospel has been judged and condemned for all the atrocities perpetrated in its name. Never mind that the gospel itself is premised on persecution from the world. Never mind that Paul said, “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against . . . the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). Never mind that he stressed that “though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world” (2 Corinthians 10:3, 4). He was specific that the saints’ weapon is “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:17). The apocalyptic context of the gospel must be taken seriously. Indeed, in Revelation 12:11 the saints overcome “by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.”

Both heretics and Jews were demonized by the medieval church and persecuted together. This raises the question of whether the origins of anti-Semitism can simply be ascribed to the conflict between church and synagogue, Christianity and Judaism. The point is, the origins of anti-Semitism “can never be divorced from the wider debate on the nature and modes of authority, by which a universal Christian church insensibly came to replace a universal empire.” There was, it is worth noting, a stream of Christianity that, reading the Scriptures differently, never accepted Constantine’s sword—or the union of church and state. Indeed, since the acceptance of this sword was based on rather self-serving allegorical and symbolic readings of Scripture, the medieval church was very hostile to alternative readings and thus the autonomous textual communities of the Waldensians and Rabbinic Judaism.

To be sure, it is literal reading of Scripture that led the Waldensians to reject the doctrine of purgatory, the intercession of the saints, Mass, the sacerdotal powers of the priests—in short, the whole sacramental universe. As long as the church had monopoly over literacy and the interpretation of Scripture, this sacramental universe endured. Sure enough, once Johannes Gutenberg’s printing press and Martin Luther’s rallying cry—sola scripturashattered this monopoly, Christendom disintegrated and the modern world was born. But by a curious astigmatism militant secularists overlook the Bible’s central role in this birth. This oversight is disingenuously ahistorical, however. Liberalism, especially in England, developed from efforts to build a new basis for political unity and social cohesion after the Protestant Reformation and the subsequent wars of religion.

To challenge religious intolerance and violence John Locke quoted the Bible verbatim. All his arguments for religious toleration and separation of church and state in A Letter Concerning Toleration are biblical and theological. Even the eighteenth-century philosophers, for all their anti-Christian polemics, “were nearer the Middle Ages, less emancipated from the preconceptions of medieval Christian thought, than they quite realized or we have commonly supposed.” For instance, they turned grace into virtue, the love of God into the love of humanity, replaced the Bible with the book of nature, God with a deified reason, the last judgment with the judgment of posterity. As Carl L. Becker succinctly put it, they “demolished the Heavenly City of St. Augustine only to rebuild it with more up-to-date materials.”

Faced with an entrenched alliance of church and crown, French philosophes attacked both. But their solution, eradicating Christianity and joining the “two heads of the eagle,” as Rousseau put it, created a monster, a materialistic version of the medieval enchanted universe. This materialization of the sacred or religious explains the illiberalism and ruthless delirium of the French Revolution. As Alexis de Tocqueville rightly pointed out, the revolution, “though ostensibly political in origin, functioned on the lines, and assumed many of the aspects, of a religious revolution.” Indeed, in its universal appeal, in its ambition to make a clean break with the past, create completely new political and religious institutions, remake humanity “and bring about the rebirth of a worldwide brotherhood,” not to mention its belief in a vast antirevolution conspiracy, the French Revolution echoed in a vulgar form all the themes of the book of Revelation.

If French philosophes and revolutionary figures appropriated biblical and apocalyptic themes unconsciously or incidentally, Romantics and Völkisch ideologists appropriated them deliberately and copiously. They reworked biblical motifs, mixed them with pagan and modern ideas, to create what Friedrich Schlegel called a “new mythology,” formed “out of the uttermost depth of the spirit.” The various and mottled streams that flowed into German Romanticism make it an incredibly ornate and contradictory movement. It defies easy definitions, but this can be said: It decried Newton’s mechanical universe and scientific rationalism and exalted emotions and human uniqueness. Nevertheless it yearned deeply for a primeval unity.
Accentuated by Germany’s belated political unification and the atomization, loneliness, and divisions engendered by modernization, this deep yearning was defined in mystical terms. In Romantic literature all nature is divine. The goal, therefore, was to be one with it. “So long as I myself am identical with nature,” said Schelling, “I understand what a living nature is as well as I understand my own life . . . . As soon, however, as I separate myself . . . [I am] a dead object.”\(^\text{18}\) Romantics criticized scientific rationalism for dividing reality analytically into distinct parts. As summarized by Novalis, “All evil and wickedness is isolating (it is the principle of separation)”\(^\text{19}\) Thus the Romantic aim was ‘reconciliation,’ or synthesis, of whatever is divided, opposed, and conflicting.”\(^\text{20}\) But this totalitarian ambition viewed from a biblical perspective is a total undoing of Creation. It is a reverse creation of the primeval chaos.

Creation was a process of separation and distinction. A God, totally independent from the primeval chaos, separated light from darkness, night from day, waters above from waters below, the sea from the land, formed Eve from Adam, created flora and fauna of infinite diversity, and to cap it all, separated the seventh day from the other days and hallowed it (Genesis 1:1–2:3, 18-23). Important, in hallowing the seventh day, He sanctified “the principle of distinction by making distinction the principle of holiness: qadesh, the root of the verb ‘to hallow,’ means something separated, set off, apart.”\(^\text{21}\) The sanctification of time, or of the Sabbath, radically desacralized all created reality. In line with this desacralization, or the principle of distinction, the Bible speaks of heaven and earth, the sea, the rivers, and the mountains, and never of nature or cosmos in the sense of a single, all-embracing system.

The fact is since God is transcendent, outside this world, any all-encompassing cosmic system excludes Him. It usurps His authority. And this is exactly what the Romantics did. They dissolved God in nature and installed themselves as gods. Through Bildung, or “self-cultivation,” any human, they wrote, could become God. In particular, artists, by virtue of their creative genius, were, like Jesus, the new mediators for humanity. They were “Gods in human form!” as Lavater intoned, or “dramatic God,” as Herder put it.\(^\text{22}\) Therefore, their authority was absolute and their freedom unlimited. The Hebrew prophets’ name for this inordinate pride and unbridled self-aggrandizement is idolatry, the ultimate expression of rebellion against God. Once this self-idolatry was transformed into idolatry of the nation, German nationalism, with all its totalitarian impulses and genocidal anti-Semitism, was born.

Thomas Mann was the first to highlight the link between Romanticism and Nazism, when in 1930 he warned his fellow Germans against the “spiritual sources of support” that Nazism could tap into.\(^\text{23}\) Hitler himself declared that “violence which does not spring from a firm, spiritual base will be wavering and uncertain.”\(^\text{24}\) He was sure that he had a divine mandate. “I am fighting for the work of the Lord,” he wrote in Mein Kampf.\(^\text{25}\) Terms such as Providence, Goddess of Destiny, the will of the Almighty, and Fate permeate his book and many of his public speeches. All these were stock terms in the netherworld of Völkisch-nationalist, theosophical, and occult groups that flourished in Germany and Austria in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Historians have drawn distinctions between these groups and Romanticism. Yet in their pantheism, organic view of society, idealization of violence, the irrational, and in their hostility to modernity, to name just a few similarities, they were identical to Romanticism. Indeed, the same Romantic ambition for synthesis, or more precisely syncretism, is what enabled them to incorporate German folkways, legends, pseudoscientific racial theories, modern scientific concepts, social Darwinism, and even biblical apocalyptic themes into their mystical worldview. Out of this explosive mélange the Nazis forged their genocidal ideology. The crux, however, is that in its deepest essence, the whole trajectory of German ideology from Romanticism to Nazism was a rebellion, an idolatrous declaration of war against Yahweh, the God of Israel, of which anti-Semitism was its concrete expression.

LEFT: As part of its heightened wartime attack on Jews, the Germany Ministry of Propaganda turned to motion pictures as a medium for antisemitic messages. The poster for Der ewige Jude, 1940. RIGHT: Nazi propagandists frequently depicted “the Jew” as a conspirator plotting world domination by acting behind the scenes in nations at war with Germany. Hanisch, artist; ca. 1942.

Just as the Romantic pantheistic universe excluded God, German mystical nationalism excluded the Jews. Indeed, in this paganized universe the
The gospel was detached from its Jewish roots and reformulated to forge a Germanic religion that would “unite a Christian heaven and a German earth in one impenetrable mystery.”

The basis for this Germanic religion was prepared by the decline of Protestantism in the nineteenth century under the assault of higher criticism and liberal theology. Significantly, it is a decline that coincided with the revival of occultism and interest in oriental religions. Given this atavism, it is no wonder that the Hitler Youth in the 1930s openly chanted, “We want to be pagans once again.”

This brazen atavism is tersely captured in Herder’s censure of his German ancestors for adopting Christianity: “Was not Arminius good enough to be a God for you?” It may be asked why German Christians did not challenge this idolatrous atavism. Apparently, in their fervor for the new deities of fatherland and national honor, they were ready to dispense with the God of Israel. Jewish historian Rufus Lears got it right: “The basic historic fact is still the struggle in the human heart and in human society between the holy and righteous God . . . and the idols of paganism.” Indeed, if Jews had allowed God to be dissolved in the polytheistic cauldron of pagan antiquity or in the syncretic bowl of medieval Europe, there never would have been the “Jewish problem” in modern Europe. But since Yahweh is indissoluble, the final solution was to dissolve the Jews themselves in the gas chambers.

Auschwitz is the emblem of “radical evil,” an “eruption of demonism into history,” as Emil Fackenheim vividly described it. Yet surprisingly, as Ron Rosenbaum notes in his very provocative book, Explaining Hitler: The Search for the Origins of His Evil, there is a great reluctance among many Hitler scholars to call him evil. Rosenbaum attributes this reluctance to “the imprecision of our thinking on the subject of evil.” But I would like to suggest that this imprecision is rooted in our distorted knowledge of the biblical apocalyptic, which captures more than any other theory or philosophy the demonic or evil forces in history. And the first point to note is that far from being a call to arms, the biblical apocalyptic was written primarily to reassure the persecuted saints that contrary to all appearances, God was still in control of history. Instead of being meaningless, their suffering, like that of Jesus, exposed the conspiracy of evil forces seeking to dominate the world.

In other words, the popular myth of a Jewish world conspiracy is a fiendish inversion. To be sure, Nazis projected on Jews the very world domination they were seeking. And their discourse was straight out of the apocalypse: “Two worlds face one another,” declared Hitler, “the men of God and men of Satan! The Jew is the anti-man, the creature of another god.” This cannibalization of apocalyptic themes is, as John Gray reminds us, a chapter in the history of modern politics. Unless we are on guard, the last chapter is yet to be written. Perhaps that is why the book of Revelation ends with stark warning against anyone adding to or taking away from its prophecies (Revelation 22:18, 19).

Elijah Mvundura writes from Calgary, Alberta, Canada. He has a graduate degree in history and taught history and sociology at Solusi University in Zimbabwe. This article is adapted from a paper he presented at the University of Wisconsin.


3. Ibid.


**Author: Elijah Mvundura**

Elijah Mvundura writes from Calgary, Alberta, Canada. He has graduate degrees in economic history, European history, and education.
He is a young man, neatly turned out in tailored slacks, dress shirt, and tie. He subscribes to a religious creed that encourages self-respect, clean living, environmental awareness, and a healthy—if possible, organic—diet. That same creed upholds the equality of women and men, when it comes to positions of leadership in the community. He says he advocates nonviolence and believes in the power of love to change the world.

**So what's not to like?**

Our young man is a new breed of White supremacist. He looks forward to a day when all people of color—to whom he refers as N---s or “mud people”—will have been eliminated from the face of the earth, along with all the Jews. His “golden rule” is summed up in the maxim “What is good for the White Race is the highest virtue, and what is bad for the White Race is the ultimate sin.”

In July 2009 one such young man—Kyle Anderson, 19, of Billings, Montana—told an interviewer for the local paper why the group he belongs to, the Creativity Movement (formerly called the World Church of the Creator), is gaining popularity among the White youth of his state, and across the country. For them, as Anderson put it, “Our race is our religion.” To rationalize such blatant racism, he explained to Billings Gazette reporter Becky Shay, “We have love for our people and love for our race. If you love something that much, it’s kind of a natural instinct to hate.”

The rallying cry of “Creators,” as they call themselves, is “RAHOWA,” an acronym for “Racial Holy War”—which appears to give the lie to their pretenses of nonviolence.

Now, we Montanans may be especially touchy regarding news stories about dangerously divergent individuals and groups, since for most of the 1990s that was how Montana customarily made the national nightly news. In 1993 a series of anti-Semitic activities in Billings resulted in the PBS documentary *Not in Our Town*, and the nationwide antihate initiative bearing that same name. Unabomer Ted Kaczynski was able to keep a low profile in the mountain logging town of Lincoln for 18 years, until his arrest by the FBI (on a tip-off by his brother) in 1996. That was followed by an 81-day armed standoff between federal agents and the Freemen, a so-called Christian Patriot group based outside of Jordan. About that same time the Militia of Montana (or MOM for short) was gaining notoriety as one of the most virulent antigovernment groups in the nation. The World Church of the Creator was at the same time among the most high-profile hate groups in the U.S.

Things have quieted down considerably in Big Sky Country since the nineties. So young Anderson's turn in the media limelight, accompanied by a rash of White supremacist leafleting and graffiti in Billings, came to many of us as an unwelcome blast from the past. Yet given the current political and economic climate, it shouldn't have come as a surprise—nor is such reinvigorated racism limited to the Rocky Mountain West these days. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), which tracks the activities of hate groups around the country, there has been a marked increase in White supremacist activity nationwide in recent months. In part it appears to have been spurred by U.S. Census Bureau projections last August that the “other than White” minorities that now account for one third of the U.S. population will by 2042 be in the majority. This news had even mainstream conservatives taking notice. Pat Buchanan remarked on MSNBC that White Americans could now expect to suffer “exactly what was done to Black folks.”

Meanwhile, Fox News contributor Dick Morris proclaimed, “Those crazies in Montana who say, ‘We’re going to kill ATF agents because the U.N.’s going to take over’—well, they’re beginning to have a case.”
In addition to the shifting demographics, the presidential campaign and election of Barack Obama has obviously provided a key accelerant for White supremacist organizing. Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL)—surely no stranger to the rhetorical excesses of hate groups—described the outpouring of racist rage following Obama’s election as “startling.” However, given the fact that most hate groups claim religious or theological underpinnings for their politics, it may not really be all that shocking. It is arguably a right-wing extremist reaction to the “Obamania” that swept college and university campuses in the run-up to November 2008. And, like the more exaggerated forms of its left-wing counterpart, this particular enthusiasm seems to have a special appeal for younger Americans.

Two things stand out about this newest iteration of religious racism. One is that its proponents don’t conform to stereotype. As Kyle Anderson put it: “People used to think of a guy with a beer belly spitting out tobacco and missing a few teeth. Now we think of people who are determined, energetic leaders, educated and idealistic, we’re the best Creators. We’re the elite.” White-power groups are today specifically targeting the cultural mainstream. They are aiming for a softer image, stressing education and family values, and picking up on trends in popular culture. Stormfront, the country’s largest White-power Web site (claiming 144,000 members), has, for example, established social networking pages on themes ranging from arts and culture to home schooling and managing household finances in tough economic times. The Ku Klux Klan’s Web site trumpets its contemporary mission thusly: “Bringing a Message of Hope and Deliverance to White Christian America! A Message of Love NOT Hate!” In October 2009 the KKK celebrated its annual “White Christian Heritage Festival” in Pulaski, Tennessee. Downplaying the Klan’s violence-saturated history, the event was open to “the General Public and ALL White Nationalists and Lovers of Freedom and Liberty.”

A second distinguishing feature of White supremacist activity today is the movement’s explicit appeal to young people, particularly young males. The Montana Human Rights Network has been tracking these groups since 1990. I asked its director, Travis McAdam, about the youth angle. “That’s how a White supremacist who’s smart is going to do it,” he said. “Part bad revisionist history, part anti-Semitism, you make it an ‘alternative choice’ for youth.” With the majority of White supremacists now under age 35, McAdam expects to see the trend continue.

For some White-power proselytizers the way to young men’s hearts is through their MP3 players. Arkansas-based racist skinhead “Byron Calvert” (a pseudonym) sponsors Project Schoolyard, a campaign to get supremacist CDs into the hands of middle-school children. Featured bands sport names such as RAHOWA, Brutal Attack, and Skrewdriver, performing such songs as “Race Riot,” “Some N-----s Never Die,” “White Power,” and “Aggravated Assault.” Upwards of 300 Web sites are today targeting White working-class youth, with offers of literature, hate-rock CDs, T-shirts, and other paraphernalia. The SPLC speculates that, as the economic crisis deepens and jobs continue to evaporate, the appeal of hate groups stands to increase, along with incidents of hate-related violence.

We as a society don’t like to think of such violent attitudes and behavior as being grounded in a religious point of view—or at least, not an American one (Islamic jihadists are, for many, another matter). Yet, although some groups such as Christian Identity do it more obviously than others, virtually every White-power organization couches its bigotry in the guise of Judeo-Christian mythology. Racial purity, and the hatred that logically and inevitably goes along with it, are in their telling as old as the Garden of Eden. The general outlines of the story are as follows: In Adam, God created a White human race, and northern Europeans are the true descendants of the biblical Israel. Meanwhile, Jews and “mud people” are identified with the nonhuman (or subhuman) animals God made before He got around to forming Eve from Adam’s rib. While there are variations on its essential themes, the subsequent history of fallen humanity takes the form of a struggle for Whites to regain, and retain, dominion over all the earth. The apocalypse, which is very near at hand, will take the form of a race war in which Whites will be victorious and Jews and non-Whites will be obliterated once and for all.

Black liberation theologian James Cone of Union Theological Seminary has argued that this version—or perhaps more properly speaking, perversion—of Christian mythology has not been sufficiently challenged by the religious establishment in this country. In a 2006 interview with America: The National Catholic Weekly, he said that “both Catholic
and Protestant theologians do theology as if they do not have to engage with the problem of White supremacy and racism.” Youths such as Kyle Anderson, with their distorted view that race itself is religion, are among the unfortunate outcomes.

Rhetoric about “love, not hate” notwithstanding, youthful rebellion coupled with religious zeal can make for a potentially lethal combination. In October 2008, federal agents arrested two skinheads, ages 18 and 20, who were planning to don white tuxedos, massacre children in a Black school, and attempt to assassinate then-presidential candidate Obama. The young men, who professed “very strong views” about White power, were from Arkansas and Tennessee; they met over the Internet. After the presidential election, in Staten Island, New York, a Black teenager was attacked by four White teens who yelled “Obama” as they beat him. Meanwhile, a general store in Standish, Maine, displayed a poster advertising an “Obama Shotgun Pool,” a lottery soliciting bets on when Obama would be assassinated. More recently, an adolescent prankster posted a poll on Facebook, asking “Should Obama be killed?”

While the last was deemed by the Secret Service not to constitute a serious threat to the president's safety, the fact that the posting occurred at all—not to mention that in short order more than 700 people had “voted” before the page was taken down—suggests a cultural context in which the kind of violence advocated by hate-based groups has, at least for some segments of American society, gained an alarming degree of acceptability. The extent to which this advocacy is couched in religious terms makes its censorship problematic, from a constitutional point of view. So, too, does the fact that it can masquerade as social respectability.

Yet the extremism that advocates “Racial Holy War” in the name of “Christian Heritage” amounts to the same sort of hijacking of Christian theology as does the popular support of suicide bombers among more extreme elements of the Muslim population globally. In neither case should American social discourse allow such views to go unchallenged. And surely, in both cases, part of the task facing us as a civil society is to address the social and economic factors that give rise to hate groups, and their earnest young disciples such as Kyle Anderson, in the first place.

Mary Zeiss Stange divides her time between her position as professor of women's studies and religion at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York, and southeastern Montana, where she and her husband, Doug, operate the Crazy Woman Bison Ranch.

1. www.montanacreativitymovement.tk
5. Shay.
7. www.kkk.com
8. www.whitechristianheritagefestival.org
11. “Hate on the Web” www.ranknfile-ue.org/uen_hate_web.html
As to War

Published in the May/June 2010 Magazine by Lincoln E. Steed

It was gratifying to hear recently that the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals finally ruled that the Pledge of Allegiance is constitutional. Atheist Michael Newdow had tried to cast it as a choice between God and country. And we all know that regardless of how bawdy our civil society may become we are not about to declare ourselves without God!

I like the easy way out the Supreme Court settled on some time ago: they call such apparent religiosity “ceremonial deism.” Works fine for separation of church and state issues, but veers dangerously toward fulfilling the biblical description of a society “in the last day,” that is described as “holding the form of religion but denying the power of it” (2 Timothy 3:1, 5, RSV).* Actually that is very close to how the Court sees ceremonial deism—religious language and symbols that have become so much a part of things that they have lost any spiritual meaning.

The apostle Paul was warning his young protégé Timothy of the times to come. Well, the Roman world of the first century A.D. was not exactly sweetness and light. It was a time of casual barbarism and depraved behavior. And Greece, where Paul tried with little success to speak of the Christ, was especially infamous for its licentiousness. But, according to Paul, the end times would be worse. He spoke of people who “will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, fierce, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God (2 Timothy 3:2-4, RSV).” Hmmm. I might not want to be labeled that way, nor would you, but it sounds uncannily like our days. I could easily check off that list by reading any daily newspaper.

So, at least according to the logic of Paul, we are in the last days. Moral meltdown, you might say. Yet we are diligent to remain religious. Or, as Paul put it, “holding the form of religion.” At the risk of mixing historical and logical metaphors, I have to say it puts me to mind of Plato and his cave allegory: sitting in veritable dark ages, we imagine that our shadowy corruption of religion is the real thing. Paul was right; it lacks power.

I thought of this conundrum of power recently as I read the startling news that the majority of gunsights used by U.S. armed forces have Bible texts engraved on them. Not engraved by the soldiers, but by the manufacturer. Not known by the military, we are told—but probably known by a few grunts who thought it appropriate. In fact, Michael Weinstein of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation reported that members of his group in the military have complained about the markings. They were told that weapons with these sights are “spiritually transformed firearm[s] of Jesus Christ.” Puts me to mind of what I discovered years ago when visiting Ambon, Indonesia, a place where thousands of Christians and Muslims were killed—and killing—in the name of religion. We discovered that there were ceremonies to bless the weapons before going out to kill. And let me tell you, the stories of the killings there at that time were distinctly unholy. And the killing was futile.

There is a good biblical argument against war. There is also a reasonable argument, also from the Bible, in favor of armed self-defense against evil. There is also a logically weak but emotionally strong argument, based on theocratic assumptions, that we can wage war as God’s agents of justice. At the best of times these are dangerous distinctions for a society to get wrong. But these are the worst of times.
Just a few days ago there was a much publicized standoff between police officers in Michigan and the Hutaree Christian militia group. Nine members are accused of plotting to kill a law enforcement officer and then attack the funeral and kill more officers. The activities of this so-called Christian vigilante group are chilling enough; but the reports revealed that groups like them are forming by the hundreds every year. They are a rich mix of social misfits, fanatic religionists, and racists. They breed on cheap talk of God and country. They feed off growing discontent with government and the opinions of sometimes rabid talk show hosts. I have commented before that it is only in degree, not in kind, that such talk differs from those who in countries such as Yugoslavia and Rwanda have incited to genocide. Maybe it is time to get the religion issue sorted out. Ceremonial deism or secret coded messages are both substituting for moral clarity.

This magazine has always and will always argue for the separation of church and state. It is a constitutional model and a requirement easily proven by the record of history. But we should never accept the separation of religion from society—or, far more ominous, the separation of faith from religion.

The Christian militia may be nativist and crude in their vision, but it is not so different from the view that many hold—that somehow the United States is a Christian government by structure, divine mandate, and agenda. Maybe there are millions who recite the pledge and take it literally. All of it. Maybe the texts on the weapons are the subtext to an assumption of divine mandate.

There are constitutional answers, of course. But I think Paul’s character analysis of the last days fits pretty well. The form of religion allied with all the character traits of the modern age signals danger. In requiring that religion be freed of state control and patronage, the framers of the U.S. Constitution built in a protection against the hijacking of the state by corrupt religionists. Religion that seeks political power is usually about more than witness. Religion that resorts to power has usually failed to realize the true Source of power. Religion that seeks to kill is not true religion.

We need more people pledging allegiance to “the better angels of our nature,” as Abraham Lincoln put it. Then they might not be so anxious to codify by force what only the Spirit can bring.

* Bible texts credited to RSV are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright© 1946, 1952, 1971, by Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission.
"If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads" (Leviticus 20:13).*

The news took the world by surprise. The Ugandan government was contemplating capital punishment for persistent homosexual activity. Capital punishment? Such as hanging? Though homosexual acts are already criminalized in Uganda, punishable in certain cases by up to 14 years in prison (which by Western standards seems barbaric enough, especially in the nations where gays can marry one another, adopt children, and join the military, the idea of condemning to death those who practice homosexuality shocked everyone. Many Westerners who oppose the gay lifestyle and gay rights were taken aback. Hanging adults for consensual sex seemed out of the twelfth, not the twenty-first, century.

The legislation, the Anti-Homosexuality Bill of 2009, would have imposed new and harsher penalties on homosexual acts, including not only life in prison but death. It would also force citizens to report homosexuals to authorities. Even more disturbing was that religious leaders in Uganda, Christians, favored the bill.

In fact, news reports linked the proposed legislation to the influence of some American Evangelical organizations, including the powerful Family. Though a spokesperson for The Family, also known as The Fellowship, eventually spoke out against the bill, this ugly episode (which at the time of this writing is not over) reveals the potential danger when Christians, no matter how good their intentions, link themselves deeply into the corridors of political power.

The Old “New Christian Right”

The best way, perhaps, to describe the Family would be to call it the Old Christian Right. Whereas the so-called “New” Christian Right could have been caricatured (and not unfairly either) as a bunch of Bible-thumping fundamentalists riding into Washington, D.C., in the 1980s—wads of offering money in one hand, the Bible in the other—proclaiming the wrath of God on anyone in Congress who didn’t vote Jesus’ position on military aid for Taiwan or support for the Strategic Defense Initiative (“Star Wars”), the Family is much more sophisticated, subtle, and quiet. All by design, too!

Abraham Vereide (left), founder of The Family, with President Dwight D. Eisenhower at the 1960 Presidential Prayer breakfast.

It's not easy to get a grasp on The Family's history because it doesn't want to be well-known. It was founded, in its ur-incarnation, in 1935 by a Norwegian immigrant to America named Abraham Vereide, a traveling preacher who felt called by God to protect Seattle from the threat of a Communist takeover. Through connections with a wealthy friend, Vereide began a weekly prayer breakfast with Seattle business leaders. When the Communist threat apparently abated in Seattle, the idea of prayer...
breakfasts with local wealthy and influential political and business leaders caught on, spreading under Vereide’s leadership to cities around the country, including the nation’s capital. By the end of World War II, nearly a third of the United States senators attended one of the weekly prayer breakfasts. Today, The Family’s only public event is the National Prayer Breakfast, held the first Thursday of every February since 1953, hosting an amazing array of the nation’s, and world’s, political and business leaders.

The breakfast, held in the Hilton’s International Ballroom, attracts about 3,500 guests, including invitees from more than 100 countries. The breakfast is hosted by members of the United States Congress, but organized by The Family. Every president since Dwight D. Eisenhower has participated, along with a variety of congressional leaders, cabinet officials, foreign heads of state, and corporate bigwigs. Guest speakers have included, besides the president, Elizabeth Dole, Tony Blair, even Bono.

Who could imagine, even in the heyday of the “New” Christian Right, Jerry Falwell getting a group like that to Liberty University?

However public the National Prayer Breakfast might be, little else about The Family is. Again, that is by design. It calls itself an “invisible” association of like-minded men and women who fellowship, study the Bible, hold prayer meetings, and counsel together. It isn’t, though, your run-of-the-mill Christian fellowship. The membership includes a veritable Who’s Who of the Washington political establishment.


With names such as those The Family can and has indeed wielded political influence. It was credited, among other things, with helping the Carter administration organize a worldwide call to prayer with Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat. In 2001 it helped broker a meeting between the warring leaders of the Congo and Rwanda, leading to a peace accord that, for now, seems to be holding. At the 1994 National Prayer Breakfast, Family leaders helped persuade South African Zulu chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi to back off from civil war with Nelson Mandela.

**Hitler, Lenin, Mao—and Jesus**

What’s wrong with an organization of Christians seeking to bring together the most powerful leaders for prayer, Bible study, and spiritual counseling? Considering the moral climate in Washington, D.C., throughout the decades—i.e., Watergate, the Tidal Basin Bombshell, Iran-Contra, Abscam, Monicagate, Duke Cunningham, Barney Frank and his male prostitute, Gary Hart’s “Monkey Business,” Jack Abramoff, William Jefferson’s $90,000 cash in the freezer, and on and on ad nauseam—one could argue that Washington, D.C., needs folk who could bring some biblical principles to the nation’s elite.

On the other hand, no matter how well-meaning the faithful, more often than not the machinations, power-grabbing, compromises, and subterfuge of politics influence them more than they do the politicians.

The Family is no exception, either. Prior to the 2010 prayer breakfast, the Obama administration was sent a letter by Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW) urging President Obama not to attend.

Douglas Coe (center), the present leader of The Family.
"The National Prayer Breakfast uses the suggested imprimatur of the elected leaders who attend to give The Fellowship [The Family] greater credibility and facilitate its networking and fundraising," CREW executive director Melanie Sloan said in a statement. "The president and members of Congress should not legitimize this cult-like group -- the head of which has praised the organizing abilities of Hitler and Bin Laden -- by attending the breakfast." (www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/02/01/crew-to-obama-skip-the-na_n_444408.html).

What CREW is referring to are often-quoted statements made by Douglas Coe, the present leader of The Family. Below are a few excerpts from the most controversial quotes, which can be found all over the Internet and in Jeff Sharlet's book:

“You know Jesus said ‘You got to put Him before mother-father-brother sister’? Hitler, Lenin, Mao, that’s what they taught the kids. Mao even had the kids killing their own mother and father. But it wasn’t murder. It was for building the new nation. The new kingdom.”

Or this one:

“Jesus says, ‘You have to put Me before other people, and you have to put Me before yourself.’ Hitler, that was the demand of the Nazi Party. You have to put the Nazi Party and its objectives in front of your own life and ahead of other people!”

Or this:

“I’ve seen pictures of young men in the Red Guard of China, a table laid out like a butcher table, they would bring in this young man’s mother and father, lay her on the table with a basket on the end, he would take an axe and cut her head off.

“They have to put the purposes of the Red Guard ahead of the mother-father-brother-sister—their own life!

“That was a covenant. A pledge. That was what Jesus said.”

However often these quotes have been, unfairly, taken out of context and made to sound as if Coe supported the policies of Hitler, Lenin, Mao, and the Red Guards (which he obviously does not), they are troubling enough even in the context that Coe meant them, which is that of total commitment to Jesus (their unofficial motto is, innocuously, “Jesus Plus Nothing”). That too is fine, except that it’s hard to recognize their Jesus—to whom they owe the kind of fealty that the Red Guards did to Mao—as the Jesus revealed in the Gospels.

Sharlet writes that David Coe, Doug’s son and heir apparent, proclaimed to Family members that they “are here to learn how to rule the world” (The Family, p. 35). This rhetoric reflects Christian dominionism, a wing of fundamentalist Christianity that insists that Old Testament law should rule all areas of life. It’s a biblical version of Sharia law, something that Jesus, as revealed in the Gospels, never advocated.

**Jesus Plus Nothing?**

On the contrary, the Sermon on the Mount is a prescription more for political *powerlessness* than for power. Turning the cheek might give you moral suasion, and with that some political influence, but it’s hard to see this motif as an effective means of winning votes, twisting arms, and raising funds—the *lingua franca* of D.C. politics. And whatever Jesus meant by “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5), only the most perverted and twisted exegesis could interpret that text as command to wield the kind of political power that, given David Coe’s quote, The Family aspires to.

Jesus in the Gospels says: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19-21).

Profound words; they have nothing to do with learning how to “rule the world,” though. Jesus also said: “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may
see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16), a call for an openness and transparency that contradicts The Family’s *a priori* secretive *modus operandi*.

Jesus taught that His faithful followers would be *victimized* by those wielding political power, not that they would be the ones wielding that power. “Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me” (Matthew 24:9). “But take heed to yourselves: for they shall deliver you up to councils; and in the synagogues ye shall be beaten: and ye shall be brought before rulers and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them” (Mark 13:9, KJV). “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake” (Matthew 5:10, 11, KJV).

Not only in the Gospels but also in the book of Revelation, those committed to Jesus are the victims of the political establishment, not the ones who run it (see Revelation 12-14). The archetypal follower of “Jesus Plus Nothing,” the apostle Paul, described his situation—a result of his passionate adherence to Jesus—like this: “Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world. I am not writing this to shame you, but to warn you, as my dear children” (1 Corinthians 4:13, 14). With all due respect, how does Paul’s life square with the dominionist theology of the Family, a theology that led, almost deductively, to the Uganda gay fiasco?

**The Uganda Gay Bill**

Despite the rhetoric about “Jesus Pus Nothing,” given that The Family does not follow, or even pretend to follow, Jesus’ call to “let your light shine before men,” it’s hard to know how much influence it exerted, if any, in promoting Uganda’s Anti-Homosexuality Bill of 2009. However, was it coincidental (or providential?) that the chief sponsor of the bill, Ugandan member of parliament David Bahati, is a member of The Family, which according to news reports has been exerting influence in Uganda for years? According to Sharlet, Uganda’s president, once a strong supporter of the bill (but who has now distanced himself from it), has also had close ties to the group.

Once the bill made international headlines, even the most conservative Christian groups, including The Family, expressed disagreement. Bob Hunter, who helped build The Family’s relationship with Uganda, stated: “I know of no one involved in Uganda with The Fellowship [The Family] here in America, including the most conservative among them, that supports such things as killing homosexuals or draconian reporting requirements, much less has gone over to Uganda to push such positions” (http://wthrockmorton.com/tag/bob-hunter).

Though lawmakers in Uganda are backing away from the most draconian aspects of the legislation, the incident shows what happens when Christians, especially those influenced by dominionist theology, exert political power. Considering that the theocracy of ancient Israel decreed death for murder (Exodus 21:12), kidnapping (Exodus 21:16), bestiality (Exodus 22:19), adultery (Leviticus 20:10), homosexuality (Leviticus 20:13), and Sabbathbreaking (Numbers 15:32-35), it’s not surprising that the death penalty would be potentially enacted in a culture exceedingly intolerant of homosexuality to begin with.

Whatever the ultimate outcome of the Ugandan gay bill, when a religious group, no matter how well-meaning, gets too closely tied with political power, the results can be frightening. However sincere the ideal of “Jesus Plus Nothing” might be (not a quote of Jesus, by the way), Jesus did say, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17, KJV). Knowing the difference between the two isn’t always easy.

Clifford Goldstein writes from Sykesville, Maryland.


**Author: Clifford R. Goldstein**

Clifford Goldstein writes from Mt. Airy, Maryland. A previous editor of *Liberty*, he now edits Bible study lessons for the Seventh-day Adventist Church.
The Informed Conscience

Published in the May/June 2010 Magazine by Skye Jethani

A political dissident is arrested for leading a movement that threatens the stability of a region. He is ambushed and apprehended by his enemies, detained without a public trial, and tortured by soldiers at the command of their political leaders.

No, I'm not describing Khalid Sheikh Mohammed or any other detainee held at the prison camp in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. I'm speaking of Jesus of Nazareth.

The fact that Christians draw their faith, life, and identity from a Messiah who was the victim of political torture seems ironic in light of new research by the Pew Forum that indicates 62 percent of White Evangelicals believe torture of suspected terrorists is “often” or “sometimes” justified. The research shows that people who attend church regularly were more likely to rationalize torture than those who do not go to church.

How do we explain these findings? Are Christians being more influenced by Jack Bauer than Jesus Christ?

Lurking behind this passive support of government torture is a utilitarian ethic that believes the ends justify the means—torture is justifiable if the information attained will save innocent lives. But David Neff, editor in chief of Christianity Today, points out a problem with this argument: “But Evangelicals have been eager to reject utilitarian ethics when addressing other issues—embryonic stem-cell research and population-control programs, for example. Even if embryonic stem-cell research turned out to be the best way to cure Parkinson’s disease, most Evangelicals would oppose it, just as we would oppose abortion even if it were shown to reduce, say, food insecurity.”

When it comes to defending the lives of the unborn, most Evangelicals utterly reject utilitarian ethics. Life is sacred, and all people—even the unborn—are created in the image of God. But this belief is put to the test when the life in question is that of a suspected terrorist. Do we really believe all human life is sacred or only innocent life? Are all people created in God’s image or only those not labeled “enemy combatants”?

Perhaps the condemnation of abortion and justification of torture found among our congregants is the result of pastoral teaching that is losing the forest for the trees. We have taught our people to oppose abortion, but have we failed to lift up the larger ethic of life’s sanctity, which applies far beyond the first, second, or third trimester. Maybe it’s time for us to preach an ethic of life that stretches from the womb to the tomb—one that encompasses even the prison camps that lie in between.

Skye Jethani is managing editor of Leadership Journal and the author of The Divine Commodity: Discovering a Faith Beyond Consumer Christianity.

Author: Skye Jethani
If Religion be exempt from the authority of the Society at large, still less can it be subject to that of the Legislative Body. The latter are but the creatures and vicegerents of the former. Their jurisdiction is both derivative and limited: it is limited with regard to the co-ordinate departments, more necessarily is it limited with regard to the constituents. The preservation of a free Government requires not merely, that the metes and bounds which separate each department of power be invariably maintained; but more especially that neither of them be suffered to overlap the great Barrier which defends the rights of the people. The Rulers who are guilty of such an encroachment exceed the commission from which they derive their authority, and are Tyrants. The People who submit to it are governed by laws made neither by themselves nor by an authority derived from them, and are slaves.

—James Madison, from “Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments,” written to the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia, 1785.

Author: James Madison

About Liberty

Founded in 1906, Liberty magazine continues to be the preeminent resource for matters of religious freedom.

- About Us & Contact

Read Liberty

Read the full content of our Magazine, Video, Podcast, Blog, and Discussions.

Support Liberty

Your help will allow us to continue in our pursuit to maintain the religious freedoms we enjoy.

May/June 2010

Discover more articles from this issue.

The Terrifying, Horrifying Evil of Religious Bigotry

Peter declares in the New Testament: “Do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering…. But rejoice that you participate in the...

The Reformation and Wars of Religion

Part Two in a Series

Why the Jews?

Anti-Semitism is a historical enigma. Its origin in pagan antiquity, its evolution through the medieval period, and its demonic denouement in the Holocaust...

Clean-shaven Christian Identity
Racism, National Identity, and the Perversion of Religion

As to War

Editorial

Jesus Plus Nothing

A religious group’s ties to the political establishment show why a motto is easier said than done.

The Informed Conscience

A New Survey Shows Most Churchgoers Support Torture. What Should Pastors Say?

The Great Barrier

If Religion be exempt from the authority of the Society at large, still less can it be subject to that of the Legislative Body. The latter are but the...

Triumph Over Bigotry and Persecution

We have abundant reasons to rejoice that in this land the light of truth and reason has triumphed over the power of bigotry and superstition, and that...
Triumph Over Bigotry and Persecution

Published in the May/June 2010 Magazine by George Washington

We have abundant reasons to rejoice that in this land the light of truth and reason has triumphed over the power of bigotry and superstition, and that every person may here worship God according to the dictates of his own heart. In this enlightened Age and in this Land of equal liberty it is our boast, that a man's religious tenets will not forfeit the protection of the Laws, nor deprive him of the right of attaining and holding the highest offices that are known in the United States.

--President George Washington, in a letter to the members of the New Church in Baltimore, January 27, 1793.

Author: George Washington

About Liberty

Founded in 1906, Liberty magazine continues to be the preeminent resource for matters of religious freedom.

- About Us & Contact

Read Liberty

Read the full content of our Magazine, Video, Podcast, Blog, and Discussions.

Support Liberty

Your help will allow us to continue in our pursuit to maintain the religious freedoms we enjoy.

May/June 2010

Discover more articles from this issue.

The Terrifying, Horrifying Evil of Religious Bigotry

Peter declares in the New Testament: “Do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering…. But rejoice that you participate in the...

The Reformation and Wars of Religion
Part Two in a Series

Why the Jews?

Anti-Semitism is a historical enigma. Its origin in pagan antiquity, its evolution through the medieval period, and its demonic denouement in the Holocaust...

Clean-shaven Christian Identity

Racism, National Identity, and the Perversion of Religion

As to War

Editorial

Jesus Plus Nothing

A religious group’s ties to the political establishment show why a motto is easier said than done.

The Informed Conscience

A New Survey Shows Most Churchgoers Support Torture. What Should Pastors Say?

The Great Barrier

If Religion be exempt from the authority of the Society at large, still less can it be subject to that of the Legislative Body. The latter are but the...

Triumph Over Bigotry and Persecution

We have abundant reasons to rejoice that in this land the light of truth and reason has triumphed over the power of bigotry and superstition, and that...

Back to Top