

ENCOUNTERING THE OTHER: EVANGELICALISM AND TERRORISM IN A POST 911 WORLD*

Anthony E. Cook[†]

INTRODUCTION

On the Sunday following the attacks of September 11, 2001, millions of Americans crowded into churches, synagogues and mosques around the country. They came in record numbers, seeking consolation, reassurance and understanding—a framework for processing what was for most a ghastly, unprecedented and utterly incomprehensible event. The religious leaders that greeted them that Sunday would play a seminal role as mediators—strategically situated between the political and media-dominated reactions to the attacks and congregants desperately seeking clarity amidst the smoke, rubble and devastation of that day.

In the weeks following 911, my family and I visited one such Protestant church, the kind of Black church that sociologists of Black religion now call the Mega-Church, located in one of America's most thriving metropolitan areas and boasting a congregation of well over 10,000 members. The sanctuary was a scaled down version of a large arena with balcony and mezzanine seating. Flanking each side of the stage/pulpit were cinematic screens projecting images of an American flag swaying gently in the wind and a choir singing its "Mormon Tabernacle" rendition of "America the Beautiful."

The images were chilling, striking me as an unwarranted invasion of secular imagery into a space I hoped would be a sacred refuge from the relentless knee-jerk patriotism of the times. Before a word was even spoken from the pulpit, I sensed these images were part of something bigger and more troubling—the insidious cooptation of the Church, particularly the Black Church, by those now mobilizing mass sentiment for war. Before any theologies or biblical interpretations were offered to frame the images flashed on the screens, I sensed a regrettable and

* This article was originally presented at the Hamline University School of Law/*Journal of Law and Religion* Symposium on Law, Religion & Ethics on October 22, 2004.

† Professor of law at the Georgetown Law Center and Baptist minister who works with churches on various social justice initiatives.

uncritical fusion of religion and political ideology that threatened to rob the Church of its most valuable asset—its autonomy, its prophetic obligation to speak truth to power and to seek first the Kingdom of God.

I knew the images could have been different, a more critical understanding of solidarity nurtured. Images of sacrifice, love and cooperation were readily available: people mobilized to give blood, send supplies and donate money; individuals gathered from all professions and walks of life to mend broken bodies and spirits, to toil endlessly through mountains of rubble and debris for a glimpse of life.

If “America the Beautiful” was to be the anthem of these troubled times, I would have preferred Ray Charles’ version—a blues-laden gospel whose every soul-drenched utterance demanded that self-critical evaluation be harmonized with patriotic adulation—a raspy and searching vocal interpretation that evoked a meaningful tension between the pain and tragedy of an American past filled with slavery, lynching and complicity in evil here and abroad BUT yet hopeful that the future was not wholly determined by that past. Clearly, without much work or imagination, the images projected that day could have been different—but they were not.

When the pastor took the podium, my worst fears were confirmed. Relishing the moment and his role as personal emissary, the pastor told the congregation that the President had invited him and a number of “spiritual leaders” to Washington for prayer in the days following 9/11, and that this very morning he had talked with a White House contact concerning the administration’s imminent response to the attacks.

A hush filled the sanctuary, the anticipation and anxiety palpable, as the pastor spoke in somber, measured phrases about the difficult times ahead and the need to be in prayer for and solidarity with the President as he embarked upon this necessary course of action. The pastor ended his remarks with a more uplifting call to action, asking the audience to remain prayerful but vigilant and to show the enemy just how awesome their faith in God’s power could be.

What would be sign of faith, I wondered—the test of righteous Christian response to such tragedy? The pastor answered without pause: “If you were planning to watch your favorite football team play this afternoon, be faithful and carry on. If you were planning to go to the malls and shop, be faithful and carry on. Fear not. That’s what the enemy wants: to make you afraid, to stop this country, this economy, dead in its tracks. But you be faithful, and through your faith stop the enemy dead in HIS tracks.”

That was it? Go shopping, watch football, and stand by *The Man*? This was the purpose and extent of Christian faith in a time of such tragedy and crisis: no historical context, no self-critical evaluation, no words of restraint for those seething with the revenge of a vigilante mob? Nothing? Like so many leaders and institutions, both religious and secular, this Black pastor had swallowed the hook, line and sinker of blind national unity and uncritical patriotism and, like a faithful servant of the powers that be, had rallied his troops to the cause.

A few weeks later, public opinion surveys reflected a disturbing development. Blacks indicated, by margins significantly exceeding other groups, that Arab and Muslim Americans should be profiled and targeted for surveillance and interrogation in the name of national security.¹ During a period of time that witnessed the indiscriminate roundup of these groups, the trampling of hard-won civil liberties under the imperial march of the Patriot Act, and the manufacturing of a consensus around an unjust war in Iraq, the silence of the Black Church was deafening.

I want to interrogate that silence more closely, a silence that was by no means universal, but, nevertheless, alarmingly pervasive. I particularly want to examine the conservative, moderate and progressive interpretive frameworks used by evangelical pastors to understand 9/11 and the government's response to that tragedy. There is, I believe, a relationship between the interpretation by religious leaders of what it means to be a Christian and the Christian's willingness to seek understanding of and reconciliation with those outside the Christian community—those who are the Other. Put another way, the use of these conservative, moderate and progressive frameworks mediate the Christian's interpretation of 9/11 and impact the willingness of the Christian to challenge or even question the state's response.

Parts I, II and III examine these conservative, moderate and progressive Protestant frameworks, demonstrating how their interpretive frameworks ascribe radically different meanings to 9/11. Part IV

1.

In the Gallup Poll, 71 percent of Black respondents said they would favor requiring Arabs, including those who are U.S. citizens, to undergo special, more intensive security checks before boarding airplanes. 57 percent of Whites said they would favor such a policy. There was no category specifically for Hispanics and Asians. But among Non-whites, the figure was 63 percent. Asked whether they favor or oppose requiring Arabs, including U.S. citizens, to carry special identification as a means of preventing terrorist attacks, 64 percent of Blacks said yes, while 48 percent of Whites said no. Among Non-whites, 56 percent supported requiring Arabs to carry IDs.

Ann Scales, *America Prepares Domestic Concerns/Profiling of Arabs*, Boston Globe A16 (Sept 30, 2001).

concludes with a discussion of how the pastor/preacher is central to an interpretive process that constructs Christian identity, influences the Christian's orientation toward the Other, and either retards or facilitates a willingness to critically question and challenge the state's response to social crises like 911.

I. CONSERVATIVE EVANGELICALISM AND THE OTHER

How does conservative evangelicalism construct our encounter with the Other, particularly in the wake of horrors like 911, in which the sheer inhumanity of the attacks seem to draw such clear lines of demarcation between us and them, the innocents and the terrorists, the civilized and the barbarian? How does conservative evangelicalism precondition us to see those who have different belief systems and cultural values from ourselves as not simply different but inferior, deserving little more than our judgment and contempt?

Jerry Falwell, founder of the 1980s evangelical political movement, the Moral Majority, provides a clear statement of the conservative position in an interview conducted by Pat Robertson—a founder of the Christian Coalition, the Christian Broadcasting Network and the popular 700 Club aired on that network. The interview provides some insight into how this “othering” takes place, and, more importantly, how the process of “othering” too easily slips into the precise kind of terrorist mindset condemned by the conservative approach in the first place.

Falwell: These Islamic fundamentalists, these radical terrorists, these Middle Eastern monsters are committed to destroying the Jewish nation, driving her into the Mediterranean, conquering the world. And we are the great Satan. We are the ultimate goal . . . [W]hat we saw on Tuesday, as terrible as it is, could be minuscule, if, in fact . . . God continues to lift the curtain and allow the enemies of America to give us probably what we deserve.

Robertson: Jerry, that's my feeling . . .

Falwell: The ACLU's got to take a lot of blame for this.

Robertson: Well, yes.

Falwell: And I know that I'll hear from them for this. But, throwing God out successfully with the help of the federal court system, throwing God out of the public square, out of the schools. The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. And when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and

the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America. I point the finger in their face and say, “you helped this happen.”

Robertson: Well, I totally concur, and the problem is we have adopted that agenda at the highest levels of our government.²

This conservative evangelicalism has several defining characteristics that distinguish it from the moderate and progressive strands discussed later. First, the line of demarcation between good and evil, us and the other, is drawn with a heavy hand. In fact, it is less a line and more a wall to be scaled with great care and at great risk. The terrorists are not just those who have committed heinous and monstrous acts; but they are “monsters.” They are, as the term would suggest, incorrigible, void of worth and humanity.

With no distinction between acts and actors, the very suggestion that Christians should seek to understand the context, causes and conditions of the terrorist act is greeted with contempt and accusations of political treason and moral complicity. There is but one thing to understand, conservative evangelicalism seems to suggest: the actors are evil, and the evil must be destroyed—by any means necessary.

This tendency to dehumanize the Other is common among systems of subordination. It was necessary, for instance, that Native Americans be constructed as savages in order to justify their extermination in our nation’s fulfillment of Manifest Destiny; necessary that Blacks be constructed as beastly rapists in order to justify Black Codes and lynching in the years following the demise of one form of social control, slavery, and the rise of another, Jim Crow; necessary that women be constructed as helpless in order to justify a subordination carried out in the name of chivalrous protection; necessary that Japanese be constructed as sneaky and untrustworthy to justify their internment during World War II; necessary that Jews be constructed as immoral swindlers and genetically inferior in order to justify their extermination under the Third Reich.

By necessary, I do not mean this in a mechanistic sense. I simply mean to suggest that subordination is invariably accompanied by the social construction that the subordinated deserve the subordination they suffer and the subordinators deserve the superior status they enjoy. Why are the two invariably connected? Because, I believe, the social

2. Quoted in Ian Markham, *911: Contrasting Reactions and the Challenge of Dialogue*, in *September 11: Religious Perspectives on the Causes and Consequences* 206, 218-219 (Ian Markham & Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi eds., Oneworld Publications 2002).

construction of the Other, the un-chosen, is needed to anesthetize us to the natural, innate claim that the suffering of a fellow human being imposes on our neuro-chemical, psycho-emotional selves.

We need to believe that the suffering is deserved, both when it is imposed mysteriously, cruelly, at times, from without, but certainly when we are responsible for its existence. When at our hand the die is cast and those deemed unworthy are ex-communicated from the ranks of the fully human or civilized, we MUST believe the judgment and associated suffering is deserved. The dehumanizing social construction of the Other detaches us from the Other's suffering, diminishes our empathy and assuages our sense of guilt and responsibility for that suffering.

The second characteristic of the conservative approach is closely related to the first: the demonizing of the Other is not limited to the direct perpetrators of the evil act itself. Rather, the net is cast wide and gathers all those whose sins have incurred the wrath of God. Interestingly, the terrorists are almost viewed as mere messengers of God's disgust with American sin. Falwell explains, "[A]s terrible as [9/11 was], it could be minuscule, if, in fact . . . God continues to lift the curtain and allow the enemies of America to give us probably what we deserve."³

Not so surprisingly, then, American sin and its unrepentant sinners, along with the terrorists, become co-conspirators in the perpetration of the atrocity. Deserving of equal, if not greater, blame for 911 are

the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays, and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle,—the ACLU, People For the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America.⁴

Christians are extolled to rise up, chase from the American Temple these Sinners, and, with finger pointed to the face of evil, exclaim: "you helped this happen."⁵

Why such a judgmental orientation, one condemning both those directly responsible for the atrocity and the innocent who bear no responsibility at all? Such overkill is not uncommon in the annals of mass psychology. It is the mentality of witch hunters, race mobs, perpetrators of the red scare and those who launch wars against unseen or imaginary terrorists: collateral damage is to be expected; better to cast the net too wide and capture the prey than too narrowly and permit

3. *Id.* at 218.

4. *Id.* at 219.

5. *Id.*

escape.

But there is more to it than this. At its core, conservative evangelicalism is authoritarian, a chain of command that values obedience and punishes disobedience. In a liberal society whose laws constrain even the Church, however, punishment must not be too violent. It must take a form akin to shunning—a condemnation by the messengers of God that public humiliation and misfortune shall mark the sinner in this life, just as fire and brimstone shall torment him in the next. Because the dominant conception of God is one of a judging God, meting out blessings and curses according to one's righteousness and sinfulness, the tendency is for God's messengers and followers to emulate this model throughout the chain of command.

The consequence is this: a harshness and rigidity, one in which the compulsion to escape an imminent judgment against oneself *requires* the harsher judgment of others. A perverse incentive is nurtured: one must bolster one's own credentials as righteous, faithful and saved, by constructing the Other as unfit and lost. If the conservative Christian has sinned and fallen short, at least there is this buffer against hell's fire, this antidote for one's fear of ultimate unworthiness: the Other is LESS worthy—and both scripture and God's anointed messenger will attest that it is so.

This mentality encourages those in the conservative school to go on the offensive, launching preemptive strikes against the enemy, broadly defined, with sometimes reckless abandon. Such behavior is reinforced by a conception of a God that engages in the same behavior and expects His obedient servants to do the same. Authoritarian Christianity stands at the ready, then, always on call to wage war against evil, real or imagined, and to impose order on a disordered world in which the line between us and them, saved and damned, is never quite clear enough.

The third characteristic of conservative evangelicalism is its willingness, indeed its readiness, to Christianize the public domain, to mould government to what it has determined the infallible will of God to be. For the conservative, the separation of church and state is a one-way street, intended to protect the sanctity of the Judeo-Christian heritage from political control and corruption. But, quite to the contrary, government must always be guided by and operate within the will of God, if it is to escape judgment and damnation. Thus, the liberal secularization of government and civil society is a devil-inspired attempt to make God irrelevant to contemporary American life. The problem, as Robertson points out, is that America "has adopted the [secularization]

agenda at the highest levels of our government.”⁶

It is precisely this repeal of a “secular agenda,” inextricably connected to a repeal of many 20th century progressive gains by labor, women, minorities and the poor that the Christian and political right seek to achieve.⁷ The bottom-up infrastructure developed by this partnership of the political and Christian right over the past twenty-five years is responsible for this reversal. The achievements of this partnership are impressive, if not outright daunting. The political organization consists of three tiers that, in reality, are more fluid than presented here but are better understood when delineated for analytical purposes.

The first tier is a grassroots political mobilization achieved through organizations like the now defunct Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition; the second is a project of mass re-education achieved through conservative Christian and secular media like Pat Robertson’s CBN, Fox News and Rush Limbaugh’s talk radio; the third tier consists of a top shelf intelligentsia situated in institutions like the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute and other think tanks and universities around the nation focused on developing a conservative policy agenda and global strategy of implementation.

6. The fear of increased secularization of post-World War I German society was a major factor in the largely conservative and anti-republican (pro-monarchical) Protestant pastorate being largely supportive of the Nazis in the 1932 election. Victoria Barnett, *For the Soul of the People: Protestant Protest Against Hitler* 23 (Oxford U. Press 1992) (citing German church historian: Klaus Scholder, *Die Kirche und das Dritte Reich, Band 1: Vorgeschichte und Zeit der Illusion, 1918-1934*, at 25 (Stuttgart 1972) (reporting that the prevailing attitude of the Protestant pastorate was that the Weimar Constitution was “godless” and that it was a “state without principles”); Shelly Baranowski, *The Confessing Church, Conservative Elites, and the Nazi State* 20-21 (Edwin Mellen Press 1986) (Protestant pastors refer to socialism, liberalism, and democracy as “godless”).

7. Eberhard Bethge, student and biographer of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, remembers that the common spirit of many Protestant German pastors was to say, “yes to a foreign policy of might, no to a domestic policy of emancipation, in the name of faith.” Barnett, *supra* n. 5, at 15. Since communism promoted the state ownership of corporate wealth and was seen as a godless, secular ideology, capitalism was accepted as society’s savior from secular communism. Of course, this binary orientation, positing communism as evil and capitalism as good, helped to clear the way for the fascist partnership of corporate and state power in post WWI Germany. The consistency and cohesiveness of the political alliance between the Christian Right and the Corporate Right in our own time demonstrates the relevance of examining the political beliefs of contemporary pastors against the backdrop of international history and the nexus between pastoral political views and church support of morally undesirable political outcomes. This alliance between religion and corporate power, in its current iteration in America, reaches back to the publishing of a series of conservative articles in *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* edited by R.A. Torrey and fully published in 4 volumes in 1917. That text, largely regarded as the literary spark of the fundamentalist movement, was commissioned by two wealthy California oil men in order to defend conservative Protestantism from modernism and liberalism. *Dictionary of Christianity in America* 1180-1181 (Daniel C. Reid ed., Intervarsity Press 1990).

As we will see, the goal of Christianizing the public domain is not unique to conservative evangelicalism. Progressive evangelicalism has a variant of its own. But its ends, as well as its means and justifications, differ. For conservative evangelicalism, the liberal permissiveness of secular society threatens to turn America into a modern-day Sodom and Gomorrah, a nation whose sinfulness will incur, if it has not already, God's wrath and judgment.

As Falwell and Robertson indicate in the interview opening this section, the list of national sins is long: killing innocent life through abortion; degrading the sanctity of matrimony through same-sex marriage and unions; corrupting the morals of decency through a growing acceptance of gay/lesbian/alternative lifestyles; legalizing a multibillion dollar sex trade industry of pornography, nude dancing and sex novelty shops; and indulging obscene and offensive behavior in everything from musical lyrics and movies to video games and TV. Christianizing the social order entails a devoted opposition to this moral decline. It is the duty of conservative Christians to fashion Christian-centered policies and laws and to elect leaders who will stem, if not reverse, the encroaching tide, sparing America the unbridled wrath of God.

The Republican Party has managed over the past quarter century to integrate this conservative evangelical agenda into a conservative political agenda intent on expanding the political power of the Party and reversing many of the progressive gains of the twentieth century through a redistribution of wealth, power and privilege back to the upper classes. This Robin Hood in reverse strategy—robbing the poor and middle class to advance the interests of the rich—is achieved through tax breaks, elimination or cutbacks of New Deal/Great Society social programs, deregulation, union-busting, easing the restrictions on corporate flight and outsourcing, and increasing the access of corporations to federal contracting dollars in every sector.⁸

8. Again, a comparison with Nazi Germany is instructive, because it illustrates how even Christian pastors can be lulled into a false complacency, believing that the state's restriction of the Other's liberties will never affect our own. Martin Niemöller, a leading member of the German Protestant resistance against the Nazi regime illustrates the point:

At that time, I did not realize that we would have to pay for these restrictions [on Jews] with our own liberty. I did not fully take into account that equality had been given to the Jews during our own epoch of political liberalism, and that any restriction imposed on them now would mean the end of the epoch and possibly the end of individual liberty, including the right to worship. In other words, to deprive Jews of political equality would mean turning back the wheel of history.

Baranowski, *supra* n. 5, at 92-93.

This partnership between the religious and political right is formidable and shows few stress fractures of any consequence. Conservative evangelicalism is growing in the African-American community, but it is supplemented by another variant of Protestant Christianity that I shall call moderate evangelicalism. The question, then, is how does this more moderate version differ in its conception of the Other, its response to crises like 911, and its understanding of the Christian's relationship to the state?

II. MODERATE EVANGELICALISM AND THE OTHER

The moderate evangelical approach to 911 is aptly illustrated by a sermon delivered by Bishop T.D. Jakes, the pastor of the Potter's House, a predominantly African-American congregation located in Dallas, Texas. Jakes' approach differs from Falwell's in significant respects. First, the idea that 911 somehow represented God's judgment on America is squarely rejected. Second, the line between Us and The Other is clearly drawn, but The Other is limited to the Enemy directly responsible for the atrocities, not "monsters" or other Americans whose liberal politics caused the tragedy. But, most critically, the Christian call to action is not to Christianize government policy and law, but rather, to pray and support the ordained political leadership God has placed in power.⁹ Jakes begins by distancing himself from the Falwell type approach:

And so, people are trying to say, "Well God did it." Not mine! Not mine! Maybe yours, not mine. The God that I've been worshipping all of these years is not a God that would send a 747 into the World Trade Center and kill at random innocent, praying and godly people—not my God. Not the one I lift my hands to and worship Don't you put that on God! Don't you get deep and spiritual and condescending and self-righteous and act like God is judging America. If God has been merciful to the world, I believe that that same God would be merciful to America.¹⁰

Jakes titled his sermon, *The Gathering of America*, and took his text from Matthew 13, the parable of the wheat and tares. Note how the

9. It is this thought process of uncritically accepting the government's position, while refusing to view that acceptance as a political act of support, that contributed to the failure of Protestant Christians in Germany to mount a significant, institutional resistance to the rise of Nazism in Germany. Barnett, *supra* n. 5, at 47-73 (detailing how the clergy's commitment to the historic Protestant position of apolitical support of the state's policies made institutional resistance to Hitler doomed from the start).

10. T.D. Jakes, *The Gathering of America*, in *9.11.01: African American Leaders Respond to an American Tragedy* 19, 28 (Martha Simmons & Frank A. Thomas eds., Judson Press 2001).

moderate approach conceives of God as a merciful, loving God, one who would not commit the atrocity of taking thousands of innocent lives simply to get people's attention, to punish them for sin or to get them on the right track. A God of fire and brimstone, judgment and damnation, might do this, but not Jakes' God—not a God of love.

Somewhere between the conservative evangelicalism of Falwell and the more moderate version offered by Jakes, a liberalizing theological shift has occurred. God is no longer conceived as a God that rains down fire and destruction on sinful cities like Sodom and Gomorrah, so it is inconceivable that God would rain down fire in the form of fully fueled 747s on the cities of New York and Washington. Neither is Jakes' God the God of Job, making wagers with the devil on how His people will respond to tragedy—playfully querying whether 911 will cause them to curse Me and die or trust Me anyhow?

For the moderate, the face of God, at least under the present dispensation, has been altered by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Jesus' crucifixion has inaugurated a period of grace and mercy during which we may freely choose or freely reject the offer of salvation. God does not coerce individuals through tragedy, but rather, permits them ample opportunities to do His will.

But where does this leave us as to the ultimate responsibility for 911? Jakes is clear on this point: "This is not the workings of God; this is the workings of an enemy. The Bible said, 'An enemy has done this.'"¹¹ Jakes places the responsibility for 911 squarely on the shoulders of those who committed or assisted those who committed the atrocities. It's not the ACLU, the abortionists and other liberals who are responsible; it's the Enemy. To his credit, Jakes refuses to paint the Enemy with broad strokes.

You must understand that Osama bin Laden and all of his activities do not represent the Muslim theology. And so you've got to be careful because there are millions of Arab Americans who love this country like we do. So you can't start harassing people because they look different or because they worship differently. They are still Americans Don't allow people to push you into going out at random and picking people who look like Osama bin Laden and attacking them, because if anybody ought to understand racial profiling! Come on, come on.¹²

It is important to note, however, that the Enemy, although more precisely defined by Jakes, is still wholly the Other, deserving whatever

11. *Id.*

12. *Id.* at 27-28.

punishment and destruction deemed necessary by our leaders. The enemy does not get constructed as the “monsters” of Falwell’s theology, but there is no indication by Jakes that the Enemy is in any way worthy of consideration, of understanding, of having the context of its actions examined. There certainly is no suggestion in Jakes’ more moderate approach that “we” may have in some way *contributed* to the enemy’s actions.

For Jakes, all that needs to be understood about the enemy’s motivations can be summed up in an anecdote he shared with the congregation concerning a recent trip to a foreign country in which the residents treated him rudely. At first, Jakes attributes his unfavorable treatment to his color, a form of discrimination to which he had grown accustomed by virtue of being Black in America. But when he realized that members from the African delegation, individuals darker than him, were being treated better, he realized it wasn’t the color of his skin that made him hated by these foreigners:

I was all the way back home before I realized they hated me for being American. Something about being hated for being American suddenly drove home the fact that, regardless of the color of my skin, I am very much American. These people that are coming against us are coming against our country, not our color When Osama bin Laden, or whoever it was behind this treacherous act, sent those planes toward the World Trade Center, he didn’t send them after black folks, he didn’t send them after white folks, he didn’t send them after Hispanics or Jews. He sent them after America. Somewhere in the Red, White, and Blue, there is you.¹³

For Jakes, the Enemy did this because it hates America. Realizing that we’re all Americans, that we’re all in this together, was what the *Gathering of America* was about. Jakes saw his role as humble facilitator of this *gathering*, this divine opportunity for a once divided America to now Unite against this Enemy. This is why his scriptural emphasis on the parable focuses almost exclusively on one aspect of the harvest—the gathering of the wheat. “And in the time of harvest, I (the Lord) will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them; but gather the wheat into my barn.”¹⁴

Falwell’s conservative theology would almost surely have focused on the clause to which Jakes pays scant attention—*gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them*. Conservative

13. *Id.* at 26-27.

14. Matt 13:30. (All Biblical citations are taken from the King James Version.).

theology, as we've noted, emphasizes sin, judgment and redemption of the righteous through God's punishment. Jakes' more moderate evangelical emphasis is on the good, God's mercy and grace.

The gathering of America is the gathering of the wheat, the good and wholesome the Enemy intends for destruction, but which, ultimately, will be protected by a merciful God. Thus, Jakes, a messenger of moderate evangelicalism's Good News—an optimistic theology always overflowing with prosperity, self-fulfillment and abundance—finds *good news* in the tragedy of 911.

God knows how to capitalize on what the enemy did. For the Bible said, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose."¹⁵ Maybe the devil did do it, but God's going to take that which the devil meant for evil and make it turn out for good because America is gathering together. We're coming together. We're praying together. We're worshipping together. We're uniting our forces together, and I want to serve notice on the devil: *You ain't seen nothing yet.*¹⁶

But even under Jakes' more moderate theology, his emphasis on a more loving and merciful God, little of that love and mercy is directed at the Enemy. On the other hand, very little of the willingness to judge and condemn the Enemy translates into a willingness to engage in self-critical examination of our government's historical role in international affairs.

Even more shocking, there is no attempt by Jakes to grapple with the aspects of Jesus' religion that might at least counsel Christians to question the assumptions of patriotic fervor, superficial unity and an uncritical march down the warpath being blazed by the White House. One can perhaps understand the absence of this reflection and discourse among political leaders . . . but the Church? What happened to love thy enemy; do good to those who persecute you; blessed be the peacemakers; to live by the sword is to perish by it as well. The very core of Jesus-centered Christianity dissolves into a blind and uncritical support of the President and his administration's narrow construction of the War on Terrorism.

Why this loss of self-critical examination? Why this abdication of the responsibility to hold political leadership accountable? The answer lies in the third way Jakes' moderate theology differs from Falwell's more conservative theology—its understanding of Christian responsibility and discipleship. Falwell, it will be remembered, calls

15. Rom 8:28.

16. *Id.* at 29.

conservative Christians to action, to chase the permissive liberals and sinful secular leaders from the temple of American public life. To what kind of discipleship, then, does Jakes call his followers? How are they instructed to engage the *enemy that has done this*?

There must be a separation in our understanding between government and church. We must understand that the Bible said that the powers that be (talking about the government) are ordained of God. Don't allow people to overwhelm you with "if you were really a Christian you should not be interested in revenge. First of all, it's not revenge, nor is it retaliation; it's self-defense. Second thing you need to understand is the decision to go to war is not going to come from the pulpit . . . it is coming from the White House. *And according to the Scriptures, we are supposed to support those who are in positions of power. We cannot weigh them down this time with our religious rhetoric.* We need to be on our knees praying. And if Osama bin Laden or whoever was involved behind him and with him and the countries who supported him are laughing today because they have knocked America to their knees, let me explain that when America gets on her knees, it's not because she's defeated, baby. It's because she's getting ready to fight. My war position is on my knees. I'll knock you out from my knees! I'll overcome my enemies on my knees!¹⁷

Jakes invokes the separation of church and state offered by the apostle Paul.¹⁸ While the intent and effect of Paul's instruction to the Roman church is debatable, the instruction becomes a wholesale concession to political authority in Jakes' theology. The directive is clear: "according to the Scriptures, we are supposed to support those who are in positions of power. We cannot weigh them down this time with our religious rhetoric."

17. *Id.* at 29 (emphasis added).

18. Jakes' phrase, "ordained of God" comes from Romans 13. That passage of the Bible is notorious for the way in which it formed the textual foundation (along with the gospel passage which states that one must render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's) of the Lutheran doctrine of "the two kingdoms." Barnett, *supra* n. 5, at 11. A version of the separation of church and state, the doctrine posits that the state is ordained by God to rule the secular realm while the church is ordained by God to regulate the spiritual. *Id.* Neither ruler is to interfere in the affairs of the other. *Id.* Though the original intent of the doctrine was most likely to secure the independence of the Lutheran church from the state, the prevailing cultural interpretation of the doctrine in Germany, even before the First World War, was that the church was a nationalist institution whose mission was partly to support the monarchy or local Protestant prince. *Id.* In return, the German Evangelical Church (which consisted of Lutheran and Reformed churches) received state establishment with seminaries, churches, and the pastorate maintained by a church tax. The cumulative effect on the German Pastorate in the years before both World Wars was that unquestioned nationalism and their spiritual duties went hand in hand. *Id.* at 10.

But certainly this scripture cannot mean what Jakes implies. Just imagine if the Rev. Frederick Douglass had not chosen to weigh the political leaders of his time down with the religious rhetoric of abolition, or if the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. had elected not to weigh the political leaders of his time down with the religious rhetoric of love, equality and peace. In season or out of season—facing republican administrations or democratic ones—Douglass, King and a pantheon of the truly courageous spoke truth to power. As men of God and pastors of the people, they always attempted to see the crisis through the eyes of the oppressed. They always called on political leadership and power to account for the social injustice permitted to flourish.

There is none of this in Jakes' interpretation of Christian responsibility. Instead, his followers are admonished to pray—to uncritically follow the Bush administration and fight from their knees. Jakes goes on to instruct his listeners on specifically what to pray for and how to recognize the answer when it appears.

And so my brothers and sisters, when you pray, ask God to give our president, our Commander in Chief and all of his advisors, to give them divine strategies, supernatural wisdom, agility of wit, articulation of speech. Ask God to make the president cunning. Right now we need somebody cunning. We don't need anybody cute. We don't need a mamby-pamby, soft-baked, freeze-dried president. We need somebody that's shrewd, and the public doesn't need to know everything. You can't fight this kind of enemy if your strategies are going to be all over CNN.¹⁹

Jakes' moderate theology has grown in popularity in the African-American religious community, as pastors and preachers have eagerly emulated it in pulpits throughout the country. Its interpretation of rendering unto Caesar nurtures a troubling detachment from the nation's public and political life and legitimizes authority without imposing many expectations of justice and accountability in return.

Abdicating any substantive responsibility to call public officials to account and atone for policies contradicting the prophetic religion of Jesus, all that is left for the moderate Christian is an obsession with private concerns: wealth accumulation, personal development and status being chief among them. Thus, the rise of the "neo-Ike movement," prosperity ministries fashioned after the late Rev. Ike that claim the lack of money, not the love of money, to be the root of all evil.²⁰

19. Jakes, *supra* n. 9, at 29-30.

20. David Cho, *The Business of Filling Pews*, *The Washington Post* C1 (Mar. 6, 2005). This article highlights ways the thirst for increased church membership is driving a corporatization of

Where are those religious leaders who would search out the theological footprints of Jesus, Sojourner Truth, Douglass and King—daring, if nothing else, to walk the less treacherous inside trail beside them. King, it should be remembered, was a democrat who staunchly criticized a fellow democrat—President Lyndon Johnson—on America’s involvement in the Vietnam War. The price was a high one; many fellow democrats practically excommunicated him and abandoned his movement for social justice.

It is interesting that through different theological frameworks and interpretations, Falwell and Jakes end up in the same place—an uncritical endorsement of the policies coming out of the White House in the wake of 911. For Falwell, the endorsement comes in the form of a highly politicized and mobilized flock instructed to move out of the private sphere of conventional religion into the public domain of politics and policy. For Jakes, the endorsement comes in the form of maintaining the public/private dichotomy of Caesar and God, and offering support to Caesar in the form of prayer and a fervent willingness to follow where Caesar leads.

Are these the only possibilities for a Christian response to a crisis as horrific and devastating as 911? Do Falwell and Jakes exhaust the possibilities? Part III analyzes the progressive theology of Rev. Jeremiah Wright and his alternative interpretations of Christian Identity, Otherness and Discipleship in times of crisis.

III. PROGRESSIVE EVANGELICALISM AND THE OTHER

Dr. Jeremiah Wright, pastor of the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, Illinois, illustrates the progressive evangelical approach to 911 in a sermon entitled, *The Day of Jerusalem’s Fall*.²¹ Wright’s approach combines and rejects aspects of Falwell’s conservative and Jakes’ moderate evangelical theologies.

evangelism. Like corporations, churches are now paying high priced consultants to develop and implement strategies to attract what are deemed desirable congregants; *see also*, Tyler Mathisen, *Do God and Money Mix?*, MSNBC News (Apr. 1, 2005) <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/7346446/>> (accessed May 26, 2005) (article describes the rise of the evangelical Christian leader in becoming an economic success story); Jonathan Mahler, *The Soul of the New Exurb*, NY Times Mag. 30 *et seq.* (Mar. 27, 2005) (article investigates Radiant church, a mega-church in Surprise, AZ; the following quote from the lead pastor McFarland illustrates the new orientation with painful clarity: “We want the church to look like a mall,” McFarland said. “We want you to come in here and say, ‘Dude where is the cinema?’”).

21. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr., *The Day of Jerusalem’s Fall*, in *African American Leaders Respond to an American Tragedy* (Martha Simmons & Frank A. Thomas eds., Judson Press 2001).

First, Wright sees 911 both as a judgment on America and as an opportunity for America, but in ways that are critically different from the respective interpretations put forth by Falwell and Jakes. Second, Wright rejects the heavy line drawn by Falwell between Us and the Other, the “monsters” who perpetrated this evil, and questions Jakes’ less divisive line between Us and the Enemy. Thus, for Wright, the line between Us and the Other, Us and the Enemy, must always be critically and continuously re-examined, in a way that neither Falwell nor Jakes takes seriously.

Third, this critical examination of what we really believe separates Us from the Other leads to a different conception of Christian discipleship. Wright rejects Jakes’ understanding of Christian responsibility as prayer partner to those in power, agreeing instead with Falwell that the Christian has a duty to socially transform the public realm of Caesar. But unlike Falwell, Wright’s understanding of Christian discipleship and social transformation is guided by a different set of normative principles that ultimately distinguish his progressive evangelical theology from Falwell’s more conservative strand. For Wright, tragedies like 911 provide an opportunity for critical self-examination at the spiritual, interpersonal and social levels. It is this critical self-examination that most distinguishes Wright from Falwell and Jakes.

Spiritual self-examination focuses on one’s personal relationship with God. Making the self-examination personal to himself as a man of God, as an ordained minister called to lead God’s people, Wright shares the fundamental question God posed to him in the days following the 911 tragedy and, by implication, poses to us all:

The Lord said to me, “How is our relationship doing, Jeremiah? How often do you talk to me personally? How often do you let me talk to you privately? How much time do you spend trying to get right with me, or do you spend all your time trying to get other folk right?”²²

Notice how Wright’s approach begins with self-evaluation and critique. This starting point, he implies throughout, fosters a humility that is essential for Christian discipleship, the critical phase in which one moves from the personal to the interpersonal and from the interpersonal to the political and social. The conservative tendencies of Falwell’s theology to erect such formidable barriers between us and them, the saved and the damned, by constructing the Other to be so unlike us, are

22. *Id.* at 88.

mitigated by Wright's critical self-examination. Critical self-examination reveals the ways in which we may be more like the Other and the Other more like us than we'd care to admit.

Taking his text from Psalms 137 and extrapolating the story of Jerusalem's fall and Israel's exile in Babylon, Wright raises a provocative question: are we spiritually prepared to deal with horrific disaster and unmerited suffering? In the face of something so earth shattering and disastrous as the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of the Chaldeans or the fall of the Trade Towers at the hands of Al Qaeda, can we stay spiritually rooted in the will of God? Or, like the Israelites, will we quickly move from an orientation of reverence to one of revenge, from a spirit of worship to one of war, from an attitude of what we owe God to one of what God owes us?

Wright sees this as a profoundly spiritual question going to the very core of Christian faith. Can we, in times of tragedy, maintain our spiritual connection to God, keeping our hearts and minds stayed on Him? Or will we permit rage to harden our hearts through an obsession with the destruction of the enemy, the evil monsters that perpetrated, aided and abetted these atrocities? Will we continue to sing, "great is thy faithfulness Lord unto me"? Or will we sing with the raging revenge of the Psalmist: "Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall"²³ and "Blessed are they who dash your babies' brains against a rock."²⁴

Social tragedies, no less than personal ones, can make the journey from reverence to revenge and from worship to war a short one. Wright's progressive evangelical theology understands that Christians must guard against these abrupt spiritual U-turns by cultivating an intimate relationship with God and allowing that love to permeate our relationships with others—even those, particularly those, most unlike ourselves.

Interpersonal critical self-examination is the second dimension that concerns Wright. He questions whether we practice love enough. Wright is focused here on the systematic practice of agape love in the places it can most effectively be practiced—in our interpersonal relationships with immediate and extended families. "This is what a church family is," he explains:

the beloved community, a community of love. Fights? Yes.
Disagreements? Yes. Falling outs? Yes. Doctrinal disputes?
Yes. But love that is of God and given by God who loved us so

23. *Id.* at 84.

24. *Id.* at 86.

much that while we were yet sinners, God gave His son rather than give up on us.²⁵

In all three strands of Evangelical Protestantism discussed in this article, agape love is the kind of unconditional, unmerited love demonstrated by God in His gift of Jesus to a lost world. Agape love is the most difficult to achieve, for it stands ready to forgive not seven but seven times seventy; it is asked to go one mile, but goes two instead; it is asked to sacrifice an outer coat and offers the inner garment as well. Agape love is always a work in progress—work requiring devotion, practice and a sense of the deep-felt mercies of God.

Wright assumes that those who believe their lives have been transformed by the mercy of God are more inclined to show mercy themselves. Just as violence and hatred beget violence and hatred, mercy and love beget mercy and love. Therefore, Wright encourages his congregation to practice and develop this love, because he understands its capacity to transform society from the inside out and the bottom up. It is the only way of assuring that the journey from our personal relationship with God and our interpersonal relationship with our designated *families* does not involve a spiritual U-turn—one abandoning the values of love and mercy—when we encounter the Other.

In addition to the personal and interpersonal dimensions of critical self-examination there is a third—the social dimension—our relationship to the broader social and political order in which we live. As we've seen with Falwell and Jakes, conservative and moderate evangelicalism have distinct understandings of the relationship between the Christian and the public realm, the realm of Caesar. Falwell's evangelicalism attempts to Christianize the public realm through direct intervention, while Jakes' evangelicalism opts for a more deferential stance to political authority, striving to impact the public realm through prayer and obedience.

For Wright, the Church has a role both within the private and public spheres, but it is a different role than that imagined by either Falwell or Jakes. As I've pointed out, for the progressive Christian, critical self-examination is at the core of Christian discipleship, both at the level of the individual's personal relationship with God and his interpersonal relationship with others. Similarly, for progressive evangelicals, critical self-examination is at the core of the Christian's participation in the broader social and political orders of the society. That participation is a self-critical participation because it is based on an

25. *Id.* at 89.

awareness of both our sin and God's mercy.²⁶

The awareness of our sin, when it is juxtaposed to the love and mercy of God, fosters humility in our personal relationship with God. Through mercy and love, the Otherness of God, something of the mystery of God, is made known to us. The kingdom of God is revealed within us, and through the process of spiritual re-birth, a partial understanding of God's otherness and mystery is achieved.

Similarly, the awareness of our personal faults and countless shortcomings, juxtaposed to the unconditional love of a God who never gives up on us, is intended to nurture patience and forgiveness in our interpersonal relationship with others. If the lessons are learned, we begin to understand the wisdom of scriptures that read: "let he who is without sin, cast the first stone;" "judge not lest ye be judged;" "love thy neighbor as thyself." The bridge of reconciliation between Us and the Other, like the bridge between the revealed God and our stubbornly sinful nature, is always a work in progress. Christian discipleship is the work of building/rebuilding those bridges and holding onto the faith that this work is not for naught.

The great commission to build these bridges is no less urgent when progressive evangelicals turn their attention from personal relationships with God and interpersonal relationships with those within the community to the social institutions, laws and policies of the larger society. The critical examination of societal sin, the sins of Caesar, is intended to nurture a sense of public humility—one that constrains the impulse to scapegoat and deflates the political arrogance that too easily rationalizes social injustice, slaughter and thinly veiled plots of revenge masquerading as self-defense. Wright engages in this critical examination in his reflections on terrorism, suggesting that the line drawn between Us and Them/the Terrorists is a historically ambiguous one at best.

We took this country by terror, away from the Sioux, the Apache, the Comanche, and the Navaho. Terrorism. We took Africans from their country to build our way of ease and kept them enslaved and living in fear. Terrorism. We bombed Grenada, killed innocent civilians, babies, nonmilitary personnel. We bombed the black civilian community of Panama with stealth bombers, and

26. This ability to view current negative circumstances self-critically through a lens of God's mercy and judgment on the nation's corporate failure to do justice is not new. President Lincoln's second inaugural speech suggests that he believed that the Civil War very well could have been God's retribution on both sides of the conflict for allowing the evil of slavery to go on as long as it did in a nation which hypocritically extolled freedom and self determination as the country's political cornerstones.

killed unarmed teenagers and toddlers, pregnant mothers, and hard-working fathers. We bombed Khadafi's home and killed his child.²⁷

Building bridges to the world of others requires, first, this kind of humility—a recognition that we too, as a nation, have sinned and fallen short. This acknowledgement is not paralyzing, but it does temper any proclivity for overindulgence by offering the sobering reality of past and present sin, the reminder that we are not exempt from the moral law and are capable of the same inhumanities we now decry. If action must be taken, if war must be waged, this critical self-examination increases the likelihood that war will be a last resort, targeted at identifiable wrongdoers and executed with as much care and precision as we are capable.

Most of all, this critical self-examination urges Caesar to build bridges of reconciliation that parallel the sometime necessary evils of war. War, like all violence, is destructive of the aims and aspirations of bridge-builders. Naturally, war intensifies resentments and feelings of retaliation, often instituting an endless cycle of spiraling vendettas. For the progressive evangelical, building a genuine international coalition and consensus at home and abroad is not a public relations ploy, but a recognition of the need for public humility—a commitment to the principle that justice must always be tempered by love, mercy and self-critical examination.

The lack of humility by public officials operating in the realm of Caesar encourages greater pride and arrogance still. But as the Greek and Shakespearean tragedies make painfully clear, hubris is the downfall of man. Thus, Wright correctly suggests that a nation—no less than an individual—must ultimately reap what it sows and must be called to account for the wrongs and injustices it has done in this world.

[During America's embargo of Iraq] we bombed Iraq and we killed unarmed civilians trying to make a living. We bombed a plant in Sudan as payback for an attack on our embassy, killed hundreds of hardworking people, mothers and fathers who left home to go out that day, not knowing they'd never get back. We bombed Hiroshima. We bombed Nagasaki—and we “nuked” far more than the thousands who died in New York and the Pentagon, and we never batted an eye. Kids playing in the playground, mothers picking up children after school—civilians not soldiers—people just trying to make it day by day. We have supported state terrorism against the Palestinians and black South Africans, and

27. Wright, Jr., *supra* n. 18, at 87.

now we are indignant because the stuff we have done overseas is now brought right back into our own front yards . . . Violence begets violence. Hatred begets hatred, and terrorism begets terrorism.²⁸

The progressive evangelical seeks to spread the good news of mercy, love and reconciliation far and wide, even to the domain of Caesar. Critical self-examination does not end with an interrogation of one's personal relationship with God or with one's interpersonal relationship with those in families and extended families within our selected communities. The ministry of reconciliation extends through mediating institutions, like business, media and government, to those with whom we have limited interactions and encounter only occasionally along the Jericho roads of life.

The evangelical commission, then, is not one that should deepen the chasms between us and them by constructing the Other as so unlike ourselves that self-critical examination is no longer necessary. Rather, the great commission is to demonstrate how those chasms between us and the Other can be bridged by laws and polices founded on the same principles of love and justice that imperfectly bridge the chasm between us and God and between us and those with whom we are in communion. But as Wright understands, bridging these chasms requires a different kind of thinking and a different kind of war.

We have got to change the way we have been doing things as an arrogant, racist, military superpower. Social transformation. We can't just keep messing over people and thinking that, "can't nobody do nothing about it." They have shown us that they can and that they will. And let me suggest to you that rather than figure out who we gonna declare war on, maybe we need to declare war on racism. Maybe we need to declare war on injustice. Maybe we need to declare war on greed We need to declare war on the health-care system that leaves the nation's poor with no health coverage. Maybe we need to declare war on the mishandled educational system and provide quality education for everybody, all citizens based on their ability to learn, not their ability to pay. This is a time for social transformation.²⁹

For Wright, social transformation cannot proceed without a deep sense of humility born from an ongoing self-critical analysis. More importantly, when progressive Christians do enter the public realm to demand of and not merely render unto Caesar, the agenda must be a

28. *Id.* at 87.

29. *Id.* at 90.

prophetic one, calling a nation back from a wayward course of action that perpetuates inequity and injustice and further fragments an already broken humanity. Wright is less concerned about the secularization of the public realm and the need to Christianize it than he is about the commodification of the public and spiritual realms that has transformed both into instruments of corporate power and elite wealth and privilege. The prophetic call, then, goes out to the church as well as the state and is a call to pass laws, implement policies and transform thinking in order to bridge the gaps between us and the Other(s) we would exclude from the abundance God has provided and the scarcity man has created.

This comparative analysis of conservative, moderate and progressive frameworks used by Falwell, Jakes and Wright to interpret the implications of the 911 attacks underscores the critical function of the preacher in disseminating theologies, policies and politics to the masses. It is this critical role of mediator that I wish to reflect on in my closing remarks.

IV. CONCLUSION: THE PREACHER AS ORGANIC INTELLECTUAL AND THE POLITICS OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

The fact that Osama bin Laden, a Saudi, and the Al Qaeda hijackers, the majority of whom were also Saudi, claimed responsibility for the 911 attacks, did not prevent a rush to judgment and a willingness by a significant segment of the population to demonize Arab and Muslim communities in general. The willingness to engage in racial and religious profiling, the willingness even to sacrifice civil liberties and launch a preemptive strike against a country that posed no imminent threat to America and had no discernible links to 911, was perceived by many Americans as the necessary cost of defending our freedom.

Why such a willingness to blindly trust political leaders, given what many saw as the increasing absence of credible facts to justify that trust? The answer is complicated and undoubtedly involves issues of mass psychology, the relationship between obedience and authority and the role of corporate media in a corporate-dominated society. Legitimation theory, however, offers a related explanation that focuses on mediating institutions like the church and the religious leaders or organic intellectuals that head them.

The Christian preacher stands in a uniquely privileged position, even when compared to other leaders in the American culture. As a mediator charged with the responsibility of conveying the Word to the people, the preacher is trusted by most as a person bearing a special calling and thus relationship with God, as one uniquely suited to reveal

the deep mysteries of scripture and to extrapolate its meaning for the congregant's life.

These preachers stand before congregations ranging in size from a few dozen to a few million, when assisted by modern technologies that broadcast their sermons via radio, television and the Internet. Regardless of congregation size, it is clear that the nature and frequency of their preachers' contact with the public uniquely situate them to mould mass sentiment.

Unlike teachers in the educational context, bounded by expectations of objectivity and openness to varying viewpoints and perspectives, preachers are free to embrace, indeed, expected to embrace, certain dogmas, creeds and beliefs designed to define the community of the faithful as different—an elect called out from the world for a special purpose. Unlike politicians, whose contact with their constituencies is discontinuous, the Preacher forges a relationship with congregants over a sustained period of time in which the latter comes to trust and defer to the former, even in areas outside the conventionally religious and spiritual realms.

This element of trust, forged through the continual contact between congregants and hierarchical figures cloaked in the authority and blessing of God, places the Preacher in a unique position. Congregants, many of whom come searching for understanding, meaning and answers to some of the most perplexing questions of our time, are inclined to accept or at least give a high presumption of legitimacy to the teachings, insights, revelations and, yes, politics, of the Preacher.

Yet, this Preacher does not come to the people unmediated, an oracle ready to reveal the unfiltered Word of God. First, the Preacher is a product of a religious and/or seminary education that has crafted a distinct lens through which scripture and social events are interpreted. This education, with rare exception, is carried out under the auspices of protestant Anglo-American seminaries—often politically conservative and fundamentalist ones—that have imposed a set of cultural and theological assumptions on the Preacher before he ever takes the podium. The congregants and, oftentimes, preachers themselves are unaware of the ways in which this education has shaped the very process of interpreting scripture and their understanding of tragedies like 911.

Second, the Preacher is a product of an internal and external culture that is status-conscious and permeated by multiple hierarchies of privilege based on economic, political and cultural power. Even with countervailing religious norms intended to insulate the religious community from the pressure of conforming to a status-oriented world,

the Church and its spiritual leaders are far from immune. This status consciousness sometimes manifests itself in the form of worldly preoccupations with the growth of membership, asset valuation and weekly revenue. It sometimes rears its ugly face in the form of an all-too-comfortable relationship with the political and business hierarchies of the world, losing in the process the Preacher's prophetic duty to critique and call such institutions to a higher standard of behavior. Too often, the pulpit and the pew are unaware of the extent to which they have modeled Christian institutions and practices after the very political, corporate and cultural practices of domination and inequality they are charged to transform.

When preachers are unaware or uncritical of the ways educational training and the broader status-driven culture shape their perspectives and orientations, they are more inclined to read and interpret scripture in a particular way. As we have seen, this sometimes leads to a construction of Christian identity that is harmful to others—making the boundaries separating the Christian community from the un-Christian Other not only rigid but un-crossable as well.

At times, then, preachers consciously or unconsciously serve as messengers for and re-enforcers of a status quo advantaging the powerful. At times, the benefits for playing this role are tangible: invitation by the power elite to the inner circle—prayer breakfasts, confidential briefings and the much coveted positions of spiritual counselor; or creation of governmental programs that channel tax monies to the institutions headed by preachers in the form of faith-based initiatives and direct and indirect funding of religious education. At times they are more intangible e.g. implementation of policies that signal the government's support on cultural issues of importance to the religious community such as: abortion, stem cell research, gay rights and the attack on the godless regimes of communism, and the heretical ones of Islam and any others falling outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Whether the benefits to the Preacher are tangible or intangible, the problem is the same. Too many have become complicit in the maintenance of a status quo that perpetuates inequality and injustice on a global scale through an insidious partnership between government and big business. This partnership is evident not only in the growth of the military industrial complex, but also in the increased privatization of core governmental functions, the loss of employment opportunities through outsourcing, and a growing gap between rich and poor, white and black, in every category, ranging from income and wealth to education and public health.

All of this is made possible through a growing alliance between fundamentalist strands of Judaism, Catholicism and Protestantism, on the one hand, and secular fundamentalism on the other, represented most notably by the Republican right, but ably assisted by the Democratic right as well. Given the shifting demographics in the South, characterized by the increasing numbers of Blacks moving back to the region and rapidly growing Hispanic populations, Republican strategists have clearly targeted members of the Black evangelical Christian community as potential defectors to the Republican Party. If successful, this strategy will better the Party's chances of maintaining political supremacy in the region and in the nation.

It is important to note that the appeal to Black evangelicals is the same appeal made to White and Hispanic evangelicals, and to other segments of the Catholic and Protestant fundamentalist community. The basic message is this: Republican policies are more in line with God's will on critical issues of gay marriage, abortion, stem cell research, references to God in the public square, and "holy wars" against the "infidels." Republican strategists believe they can successfully shape this new alliance without any special concessions to the Black community on traditional social issues of concern to that community. Indeed, any such concessions would invoke the ire of the Republican party's true base, southern Whites whose flight from the Democratic to the Republican party was prompted by the voting, educational and social gains of Blacks in the post World War II era.

Thus, the Republican Party believes it can attract increasing numbers of Black evangelicals, while continuing to oppose, as a matter of policy, race-based affirmative action and supporting such racially charged policies as the death penalty, mass incarceration through the so-called wars on crime and drugs and, at least, tacitly, the confederate flag movement.

Evangelical preachers, particularly those in the Black community, whose position as gatekeepers to a Black electorate that has overwhelmingly voted Democratic since the second World War, must resist the offer to sit at either the right and left hand side of secular power, to bask in the glow of a superficial and politically motivated accommodation. This is as true of Democratic political strategies as it is of Republican ones. The Church must maintain its autonomy and its ability to prophetically critique and challenge any political administration that fails to promote justice for the least of these.

This brings me back, then, to where I began this presentation, recounting my experience at one of our nation's mega-churches in the

days following 911. Reflecting now on that experience, I realize that the aspect I found most troubling was unspoken, more an attitude than an explicit creed.

As I listened to the pastor instruct his flock on the meaning of “Christian faith” in times of crisis, his words oozing with the pride of an insider honored to serve as emissary for our nation’s political elite, I immediately recalled the request by the mother of James and John that her sons be permitted to sit at Jesus’ right and left hand in the kingdom they believed Jesus had come to create. James and John’s mother, like too many pastor/preachers today, was petitioning for Chosen status, to have a special relationship to power that would distinguish her sons from even others within the community of believers and certainly from those outside that community.

Perhaps it is endemic to human nature, part of the finiteness and frailty we endure as human beings, to seek Chosen status, to be recognized as special, as superior to the Other. Perhaps this quest for Chosen status is a projection of our fear of being alone in the universe, of being hopelessly inconsequential, of fretting and strutting upon life’s stage with sound and fury, yet, in the final analysis signifying nothing. At the core, perhaps, we all desire the special recognition of the Chosen to prove we matter.

Jesus fully understood, it would seem, from his reply, that this was a deep-seated human insecurity, rivaling the strongest of human impulses. He didn’t deny or try to bury the impulse. Instead, he subverted and redirected it. You ask what is not mine to give, he responded. But any who would desire to be first, must make themselves last. If you desire to be the greatest, you must make yourself a servant.³⁰ In other words, Jesus made clear that the only way to be Chosen was to live a life of the *Un*-chosen, to abdicate the power and privilege that is often bestowed upon us as a result of birth, work and circumstance. His instruction to the rich man seeking The Way seems instructive: if you truly desire righteousness, give all you have to the poor and follow me.

As a movement of the *Un*-chosen, the religion of Jesus blurred the boundaries between the community of believers and the Other outside that community. At every step, Jesus encouraged his followers to identify with the un-chosen by understanding themselves to be un-chosen as well. He drank wine, ate and fellowshipped with the dregs of the Jewish community—prostitutes, thieves and tax collectors. He healed, fed and ministered to those deemed by society to be outcasts

30. Matt 20: 26-27.

unworthy of compassion or concern.

This movement of the *Un-chosen* was a movement of Unity, a movement of One, everywhere blurring the line between Self and Other, Us and Them, Saint and Sinner, the Saved and the Damned.³¹ It was a movement that had the audacity to pronounce, to the poorest of the poor, what is still the most egalitarian and subversive philosophy yet uttered: *The Kingdom of God is Within*.

The religion of Jesus would have us look around our own communities, just as he did, and identify those whom religious and secular communities have deemed the un-chosen—the forgotten, the scorned, the least—and by renouncing the privilege and power of our own status, choose to be in solidarity with them, even when by so doing we risk our own popularity and security.

To be in solidarity with the un-chosen requires a prophetic detachment from the powers that be, the hierarchies of privilege that construct the Other as the un-chosen. It requires autonomy strong enough to oppose religious leaders who have subverted the House of God for their own status-oriented gain and have stifled their critical voice in a suffocating alliance with the rich and powerful.³² Like Jesus, we must sometimes chase the moneychangers and swindlers from the Temple—in both the religious and political realms—but our ultimate

31. One well-recognized person who appears to have crystallized this concept of the un-chosen is Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was one of an isolated few Protestant German pastors to resist Nazism from the beginning. *Bonhoeffer* (Journey Films. Inc. 2003). The experiential and intellectual source of his resistance to the persecution of Jews was forged through Bonhoeffer's studies at New York's Union Seminary under progressive theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and his time spent among oppressed Black Christians at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. *Id.* See also, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Who is Christ For Us?* 15 (Craig Nesson trans., Craig Nesson & Renate Wind eds., Fortress Press 2002).

32. In response to Germany's "Jewish Question" in 1933, Bonhoeffer specifically addressed the possible ways the church can and should respond to state oppression of "unchosen" groups and individuals.

First, there is the question of whether the character of [the state's] action is legitimate, that is, to call the state to responsibility. Second, there is service to the victims of state action. The church is obligated unconditionally to the victims in every civil order, even when they do not belong to the Christian congregation. The third possibility consists of this, not only to tend to the victims under the wheel, but to stick a rod in the spokes of the wheel itself. Such action would be inherently political action by the church and is only then possible and requisite when the church sees that the state has failed in its function of creating law and order.

Bonhoeffer, *id.* at 58-59. All three of these options require prophetic clarity. One must choose to examine the state's action and have prophetic criteria for critical examination. One must be able to view all victims of state action, *regardless of its legitimacy*, as though one is responsible to tend (for the Christian obligation to "visit" the prisoner and to be in solidarity with the prisoner does not turn on the prisoner's actual guilt or innocence but rather the prisoner's status as confined by the state). One must be able to discern with prophetic senses when the state has transgressed to the point that true political resistance is necessary.

goal must always be love, redemption and reconciliation, lest we become the very thing we struggle to subvert.

Is reconciliation always possible? Will the struggle of the unchosen to blur the line between Us and Them always be achieved? Only the unrelenting utopian would say so. In our existential condition, torn as we are between our finite limitations and our infinite possibilities, we are destined for a life of angst, of struggle, of a world in which our reach will almost always exceed our grasp. Even Jesus' prayer in his final hours reflected this struggle, elucidating the crucial role of faith: "[L]et this cup pass from me." But, then, Alas, not my will, but "[T]hy will be done."³³

The struggle of the unchosen is bitter, and only the insane would not cry out for reprieve. But if reprieve is not His will, there is yet a Balm in Gilead—a faith that loss of reputation, property and even life will not have the last word. That, like Jesus, even in destitution, disrepute and death, we will overcome the world and ultimately boast: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave where is thy victory?"³⁴

The religion of Jesus is not widely practiced today. Suffice it to say, the journey from the dusty roads of Palestine to the official religion of the Roman Empire has been a circuitous one. Equally circuitous was the journey from the early Christian renunciation of private property to private wealth as a sign of a believer's faith and God's resulting favor. It has been a long journey, indeed, from a religion that dared to identify with the outcasts of society to one that so unflinchingly identifies with the powerful over the weak, the rich over the poor, the celebrated over the condemned and the revered over the reviled. Somewhere along this journey, Jesus' religion, the religion of the *Un*-chosen, was marginalized by many churches and their leaders, swept into a closet of historic trivia and replaced by more rigid conceptions of Christian identity and community, ones consistent with the maintenance of power and privilege but antithetical, in so many ways, to Jesus' vision and life.

My purpose here, in part, has been to retrieve the religion of Jesus, this religion of the Unchosen, from the closet of historical irrelevancy by examining how three contemporary preachers—Jerry Falwell, T.D. Jakes and Jeremiah Wright—responded to the 911 tragedy. I have examined how their conservative, moderate and progressive approaches to Christian identity and community reinforce and/or challenge the tendency in religious and secular circles to construct communities of the chosen and unchosen. The ways in which this line between chosen and

33. Matt 26: 39 & 42.

34. Matt 26: 39 & 42. I Cor 15:55 (emphasis deleted).

un-chosen is drawn critically affects our encounter of the Other. Our eagerness to mark the divide determines our willingness to engage in the kind of self-critical evaluation so vital in promoting both understanding and reconciliation in a world that desperately needs both.