

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE TX 76504-3629 254-773-2625 BCWendland@aol.com

Asking about war and peace

The author of a timely new book asks Americans to look honestly at the question of whether our Christian political leaders' interpretations of the Christian message have brought peace to our nation and the world. In *Faith-Based War: From 9/11 to Catastrophic Success in Iraq* (Equinox Press, 2009), T. Walter Herbert, a United Methodist layman who is Emeritus Professor of American Literature and Culture at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, observes that our leaders' version of the message has consistently brought war instead of peace.



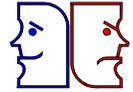
Religious views that caused blindness

In Herbert's view, a misguided faith-based policy governed key features of the American invasion of Iraq. These included the choice of a self-defeating "Shock and Awe" strategy and the mismanaged occupation. Herbert believes a religious rationale also blinded devotees of the White House torture program to the predictable cost in American lives and the damage to America's moral standing. He sees these developments as manifestations of a dangerous pattern that has often been reflected in American leaders' actions and American citizens' views. He therefore urges American Christians to recognize and question the interpretation of Christianity that leads to following this harmful pattern.



From Europeans' first arrival in America until now, Walt Herbert observes, many American Christian political leaders have practiced an imperialist militarism that is the opposite of what true Christianity teaches. Herbert finds that this militarism has combined elements of classic Puritan tradition with the mythology of the Western frontier. *Faith-Based War* brings into focus what he calls "this dangerous perversion of Christian teaching" and details what he sees as its catastrophic results.

A conflict of religious values



"The paradox of American torture as a public/secret enterprise is rooted in a longstanding conflict of religious values," Walt Herbert points out in *Faith-Based War*. "For many centuries," he tells us, "torture was a standard practice in Christian nations, in keeping with a theology that has recently been revived on the Religious Right."

Two Christian traditions at stake

One Christian tradition at stake here, Herbert explains, says human beings have God-given rights. It was prominent within Christianity during its first three centuries. In that period, Christians identified salvation with liberation from oppression, including oppression by the Roman Empire.



After Emperor Constantine made Christianity the religion of the Empire in the fourth century, however, Christian bishops were put in powerful positions that supported the Empire, and Bishop Augustine put forth a different doctrine of salvation. He saw it as forgiveness for indwelling sin instead of liberation from coercive external powers.

This doctrine and related later doctrines that many Christians now accept without question, Walt Herbert explains, say God is full of wrath against the human race because we defy God's law. Thus God torments us, in life and even after death for those who are not saved by Christ's blood. Many who accept these doctrines say that the state needs to act as God's agent in delivering God's wrath against human sin.

Which motives should we encourage?

Early American theologian Jonathan Edwards promoted this view that approves state-sponsored cruelty, and unfortunately, many American political and military leaders still promote it today. But earlier strands of Christian belief that oppose torture are still alive today, too. Which strand should we follow?

In Walt Herbert's view, torture comes from an impulse born from fear and satisfied by pain. It purges the wounded community's furious emotions. It fulfills fantasies of god-like empowerment. Don't Christians need to help subdue such motives rather than encouraging them?



A promised land for a chosen people?

Herbert finds that throughout American history many of our leaders have portrayed our nation as a promised land occupied by a chosen people. This view, he writes, originated with the colony established by English Puritans at Massachusetts Bay in 1630. They saw their mission as the fulfillment of the ancient biblical promise in which God chose one nation to be favored among all the peoples of the earth.



The Puritans' leader, John Winthrop, described what he saw as the community's two main God-given obligations. The first was to establish a "Bible commonwealth" in which God's truth and justice would prevail and members would share a bond of love. Second, community members were to be willing to "abridge themselves of superfluities in order to supply others' necessities"—to show one another justice and compassion. By carrying out these obligations, the community hoped to be an international inspiration and model—a "city on a hill" for all to see. Winthrop warned the settlers that if lust of wealth and power supplanted these Christian virtues, terrible punishment would follow.

A vital tradition of opposition



Disagreement soon erupted, however. Colonist Roger Williams denied that the English had an inherent right to occupy the "promised land." He felt the colony could get that right only in fair negotiations with the tribes who had occupied it before the colonists arrived. He also argued that Christians had inherited God's covenant with Israel only in a spiritual sense, as a standard of Christian spirituality and collective life. In addition, Williams said the government of the colony had no right to force conformity with orthodox belief by making dissent a crime.

As a result of these views, Williams was banished from the Massachusetts Bay colony. But on land he bought from a native tribe, he founded the Rhode Island colony, an alternative "city on a hill" in which freedom of conscience was guaranteed and religious doctrine and state power were in what he saw as the proper relation. These principles, explains Herbert, were incorporated into the U.S. constitution and carry authority today.



What do these traditions say today?

What do these two strands of American thought say to us today? Some of us question Winthrop's views about what kind of punishment will come to non-Christians. But his ideal of a community in which truth and justice prevail and love ties its members together still seems admirable. So does forgoing "superfluities" in order to help others have necessities.

However, a community with Winthrop's admirable goals wouldn't have to include only Christians. True Christianity emphasizes these goals, but many adherents of other religions or of no formal religion also admire and promote them. And plenty of us who claim to be Christians ignore them. Many, in fact, actively promote their opposites. The present health-care debates reflect plenty of unwillingness to forgo luxuries in order to provide others' necessities. So does our determination to continue our present levels of oil consumption and air and water pollution.



Claims we need to question

Taking the Bible's stories of the promised land and the chosen people literally is unconvincing to many Christians today, given what is now known about the Bible's origin and development and the nature of all religions and their sacred documents. Seeing ourselves as the unique heirs of God's promise, and seeing America as today's unique promised land, is even less convincing. Yet countless American Christians, some of whom hold high military or government positions, seem to assume without question that America is in fact today's God-given promised land and that American Christians are God's chosen people. As churches and as individuals, we need to be actively and openly questioning that assumption.



The chosen and the not-chosen

In the Massachusetts Bay understanding of the city on a hill, Walt Herbert explains, the city serves as a bastion for those who prove their chosenness by conforming to what the authorities consider correct belief. In return, citizens are given freedom to expand their wealth at the expense of the not-chosen. Herbert sees this vision as a religious delusion, despite its biblical origin and its long im-



pact on America's sense of national destiny. "It is untrue," he writes, "that God has granted any community a preemptive right to economic resources possessed by others, or that the success of the community making such a claim results from military assistance from on high."



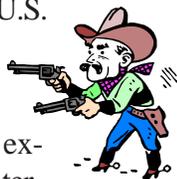
Roger Williams's vision, Walt Herbert points out, sometimes requires the use of military power but never as God's wrath visiting divine punishment on the non-chosen. In the city Williams envisioned, Herbert observes, "members of the community bear an obligation to bring their best estimate of the divine will into a collective debate about community policies." Williams saw that God's judgment falls on both parties to every conflict and finds both virtue and wickedness on both sides.

A face-off at the frontier

The promised-land concept and the belief that the English colonists were chosen by God, Walt Herbert explains, grew to mean enlarging the sphere of democracy and freedom and spreading America's blessings to other societies. The Puritans came to see their "city on a hill" as a staging ground for expansion, and the promised land metaphor was quickly adapted to the nation's westward expansion.

First, Herbert observes, native tribes in New England were compelled to accept the losing part in this drama. Then the same scenario was applied to other native tribes across the continent. The pattern was played out in many wars within the U.S.

A corollary myth soon followed. It featured "a hero figure who plays his part at the line of conflict where an expanding 'promised land' presses against territory occupied by the not-chosen. The chosen and the not-chosen face each other at a frontier where God's



favorites claim their birthright against godless opposition." And because the chosen typically believe they are entitled to exploit the land without hindrance from the not-chosen, they believe their freedom depends on removing hindrances, by force if necessary.

Our national faith



Walt Herbert points out that many cowboy novels and Clint Eastwood movies have been based on these twin visions of the frontier hero and of America as an expanding promised land occupied by chosen people. Most important, however, and most dangerous and most unchristian, Herbert warns, these visions have become key parts of a national faith that now shapes our way of encountering the world



beyond our borders. According to this faith, Herbert observes, any resistance to American claims defines the resisters as enemies of the divine promise.

This faith also mistakenly holds that America's conduct toward other nations is consistently and triumphantly innocent, and that America's freedom requires

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ...'"
 —Matthew 5:43-44

access to resources controlled by other societies. Many American Christians claim that America is a Christian nation, but this faith is not real Christianity. It's the opposite of it.

"At its most intense," writes Walter Herbert, "radical Christian nationalism is grounded on the belief that hatred for God is endemic to the moral constitution of human beings, provoking God's righteous wrath upon all except those saved by Christ. In this view,

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I've written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 17 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

Christians are obligated to do their part in executing the divine wrath against evildoers.” Yet, Herbert reminds us, Jesus expressly rejected this practice.

Questions Christians need to ask

Our churches need to be disseminating information and views like those that *Faith-Based War* presents, about our history and about how American leaders’ religious views have often led to war instead of peace. Reading and discussing varied views about such topics in our church groups, and hearing them in sermons, could help



us be more faithful Christian citizens. It could help us see important relationships between what we claim to believe as Christians and what policies of our military and government leaders we support.

Should our nation torture enemies as a way of venting our anger? As a way of punishing them on God’s behalf? Even as an effort at self-defense? Are we God’s chosen? Even if we were, would that give us the right to claim the resources of other countries by using force? The Christian answers to such questions aren’t all obvious, so we need to be learning and talking about them in our churches. Books like Walt Herbert’s could help.

Barbara



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Barbara Wendland
505 Cherokee Drive
Temple TX 76504-3629

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In *Faith-Based War*, Christian layman Walt Herbert describes where his faith journey has led him. It closely resembles where mine has led and where many *Connections* readers tell me theirs have also led.

“Religious truth ultimately refuses to be fixed into language, at least for me,” Herbert explains. “It involves encounters with a living mystery that takes place on scheduled and unscheduled occasions—encounters with texts, with other people, and with presences that are evoked by art, by landscapes and seascapes. Shared action for the sake of social justice provides such occasions, and sacred ritual sometimes provides a context for them.” It’s interesting that for him as for many others of us, the texts don’t come only from the Bible. Interesting, too, that what the church classifies as sacred ritual provides a context only sometimes.



“By the accident of my birth and rearing, biblical stories are central to my religious life,” Herbert finds. However, those stories don’t limit his religious beliefs, just as they don’t serve as limits for countless other Christians’ beliefs. “My journey has led me to a place shared by many others,” he assures us, “where sharp boundaries no longer surround a Christian heritage.”

How helpful it would be for the many Christians whose experience has been similar, if churches more openly and frequently acknowledged the value of such wide-ranging journeys rather than denouncing or trying to restrict them.