

Connections



A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Empire and the realm of God

Empire is still with us today. In fact, in some ways it is stronger than ever now. Unlike the Roman Empire of the first century, in which Christianity arose, and the other empires prominent in world history, today's American empire has no geographical boundaries. It even extends into space, so it is not only global but cosmic. Many of us Americans are reluctant to see it as an empire, but even if we admit that it is, we tend to see it as benign and accidental. However, leading Christian thinkers are insisting that it is neither benign nor accidental.



They're also pointing out how Jesus and his earliest followers actively resisted the Roman Empire. Sometimes the resistance was relatively subtle though still treasonous, such as applying the emperor's titles to Jesus. Sometimes it wasn't subtle at all but involved instead what we'd now



call public political demonstrations, as when Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey with his followers when Pilate was entering from the opposite direction in an imperial procession.

Has the church's emphasis changed?

Many Christian thinkers today are reminding us how strongly Jesus seems to have emphasized the kingdom of God or kingdom of heaven, and how he contrasted it to the Roman Empire. Some of these thinkers are observing to their dismay, however, that in today's church we give little emphasis to what Jesus apparently said about the kingdom of God. We focus more, these scholars find, on a kind of personal salvation that doesn't seem to have had high priority in Jesus's teaching. If they're right, we need to take a fresh look at the gospels and reconsider our priorities.



The church changed more than the empire



In an essay in the book *The American Empire and the Commonwealth of God*, Christian scholar John Cobb writes about the source of the values that oppose empire. "Chiefly," Cobb finds, "these contra-imperial ideals can be traced to what Karl Jaspers has taught us to call the Axial Age, the period during the middle of the first millennium before the Common Era, when the philosophies and religious traditions that still shape much of the mind of the world came into existence." (This is the period that Karen Armstrong describes in her book *The Great Transformation*, which I wrote about in the [July 2007 Connections](#).)

An imperial period that evoked reflection

The Axial Age values arose, Cobb explains, "in an imperial period that evoked individual reflection as a response. This reflection was about how the world and human society are actually to be constructed, and about what is truly valuable and worthwhile for individual people in their relations with others. The answers arose not so much from the study of ancient texts as from fresh thought and insight."



The answers arising in the Axial Age were diverse, Cobb points out, but they all proposed values that, if taken with full seriousness, would lead away from imperialism. These values, Cobb explains, have been mediated to today's world mainly through Jesus and Muhammad, with Jesus playing the larger role in the west. Both lived after the Axial Age but stood in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets who were part of it.

What about our imperial period?

The anti-imperial elements of Jesus's message were taken seriously by the early church, Cobb observes. It taught people to seek goals other than wealth and power, and many early Christians refused military service. But when the empire allied itself with the church, the church changed more than the empire. Cobb sees that change still in effect today. Could we reverse it? Is the church even trying to reverse it?

We sometimes miss the point

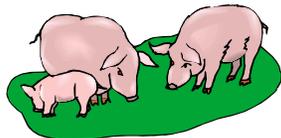
Many of us miss some of the main points in scripture passages because we don't know much about the history and culture they arose from. This seems to be especially true with New Testament passages that refer to their Roman Empire setting. They don't explicitly mention it, because their original readers were well aware of it. Most of us aren't, however, so we miss some of what is being said about how Jesus and his early followers resisted the Empire.

“Give the Spirit something to work with”

Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine, a professor at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, mentions this problem in her book *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (HarperSanFrancisco 2006). She tells how some of her students insist that they don't need to know much about scriptures' historical and cultural setting. “I read the text,” they say, “and the Holy Spirit guides me.” But Levine doesn't consider this a valid reason for staying uninformed. She advises them, “Give the Holy Spirit something to work with.”



Levine tells, for example, how the story of Jesus's expulsion of demons into a herd of pigs (whose meat was forbidden to Jews), in Mark 5:1-20, refers to the Empire in a way many of today's Bible readers miss. Besides giving a less than subtle clue to the non-Jewish composition of the population, she explains, “the story also allows a nice political dig against Rome, given that the ‘unclean spirits’ identify themselves as ‘Legion,’ the Latin term for an army cohort.”



We miss the challenge

Levine finds that we miss the challenge in many of Jesus's parables because we don't realize how their original hearers experienced the Roman Empire. Luke has filled his narrative with stories of righteous tax collectors, Levine explains, and “in Jesus's time the tax collector was the agent of the Roman government occupying Judea. Thus ‘faith-

ful tax collector’ would have been an oxymoron.”



Christians today who fail to notice the tax collector as an agent of a foreign, invading government will miss the shock value and political implications of such stories, Levine warns us.

Another example of why we need to know about the Empire is the fact that, according to Levine, the Caesars on the throne in Rome were called “father,” much like the way in which Americans call George Washington “Father of our country.” Thus by speaking of the “Father in heaven,” Levine explains, Jesus is insisting that Rome is not the true father. “The address to God as Father,” she points out, “whether offered by Jesus or anyone else, signals more than piety. It also has a political edge.”

Not a kingdom of the afterlife

In his book *God and Empire*, John Dominic Crossan says he finds it unfortunate that the expression “Kingdom of Heaven” ever entered the Christian vocabulary. Because many of us are unfamiliar with the expression's original Roman Empire setting, we miss much of its meaning. It is all too often misinterpreted, Crossan finds, as the Kingdom of the future, of the next world, of the afterlife. But what was originally meant was “what this world would look like if and when God sat on Caesar's throne, or if and when God lived in Antipas's palace. ... It is about the transformation of this world into holiness, not the evacuation of this world into heaven.”

Crossan reminds us that in the New Testament the expression “Kingdom of Heaven” is used only by Matthew, while “Kingdom of God” is used by several Bible authors. And for Matthew, Crossan observes, “heaven” was simply a euphemism for “God.” It was like our saying “the White House announces” to mean “the president announces.”



100 percent political and religious

Crossan is emphatic about the political implications here. “The Kingdom of God,” he explains, “is inextricably and simultaneously 100 percent political and 100 percent religious. ‘Kingdom’ is a political term, ‘God’ is a religious term, and Jesus would

be executed for that ‘of’ in a world where, for Rome, God already sat on Caesar’s throne because Caesar was God.” Nobody in the first century, Crossan finds from his research, made a distinction between political and religious, the way we do today. “The emperor’s divinity,” he finds, “was the incarnate heart of Roman imperial theology and stayed as such long after Augustus was dead.”



“Jesus announced the presence of the Kingdom of God,” Crossan reminds us, “by inviting all to come and see how he *and his companions* had already accepted it, had already entered it, and were already living in it. ... Basically it was this: *heal the sick, eat with those you heal, and announce the Kingdom’s presence in that mutuality.* [Crossan’s italics]... The logic of Jesus’s Kingdom program is a mutuality of healing (the basic spiritual power) and eating (the basic physical power), shared freely and openly.”

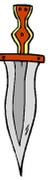


How should we resist?

In theologian John Cobb’s view, expressed in an essay in *The American Empire and the Commonwealth of God*, the main Christian basis for resistance to empire can easily be seen even by casual readers of the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It is what Jesus’s parables and other teachings describe, and what his behavior demonstrates. We usually call it the kingdom of God, but Cobb prefers to call it the commonwealth of God. “This term,” in his view, “besides not emphasizing the controlling power of a ruler, suggests that the realm may be organized for the common good.”

As you go, proclaim the good news, “The kingdom of heaven has come near.”
—Matthew 10:7

Compared to such a realm, observes Cobb, “clearly a society in which people can survive only through cutthroat competition does not measure up well. The same is true of a society that invites its members to take pride in militarily imposing their collective will on others.”



Christianity’s emphasis has changed

In Cobb’s view, the church has made little of the kingdom over the centuries. For the majority of Christians, Cobb observes, Christianity has changed to emphasizing personal salvation from sin, guilt, and hell, while supporting empire instead of resisting it as Jesus and his first followers did.

Many of today’s thinkers see crucial questions confronting American Christians. “How can we be faithful in the American Empire?” “How should we resist the imperial normalcy that we’re part of?” Cobb and the other Christian scholars I’ve quoted in this and the [previous two Connections](#) feel strongly that the implications of Jesus’s message extend to what we classify today as political action. Yet well-funded, well-organized groups of United Methodists are aggressively trying to eliminate the



UMC agency responsible for carrying out political action on behalf of the denomination. That’s one of several ways in which many of today’s churchgoers ignore or even oppose what Jesus gave high priority to.

“One who takes Jesus’s message seriously,” writes Cobb, “is called in our day to work for the improvement of the lot of the poor through political channels as well as private and ecclesiastical ones. Today that means that we are called to work against American empire.” It means, he feels, that

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 14 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 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 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.

we must work toward eventual global governance by democratic free institutions instead of by an imperial power.



Cobb recognizes that reaching this goal would require an enormous shift. He acknowledges that we will never achieve perfection with regard to ideals such as getting our society to renounce the use of violence. However, he feels we must work for whatever improvements are possible. He sees our main current task as speaking up about the need for a profound reversal of empire's values. And theologian Joerg Rieger, in his *Christ and Empire*, reminds us that in today's situation, in which empire determines

what is "normal," failure to name this normalcy for what it is, and to resist it, amounts to supporting it.

Called to fan the sparks into flame

"We who call ourselves Christians," Cobb writes, "are called to fan the sparks of the message into a flame that can help to reverse the headlong plunge of our nation into the lust for world domination." Few of today's churchgoers seem willing to risk doing much of that fanning, but it apparently is essential for all of us in today's world who want to be faithful to the teaching and example of Jesus.

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"Being Christian in an age of empire should not be particularly difficult for us," observed Jim Winkler, who heads the United Methodist Church's General Board of Church and Society, in a May 2006 speech. After all, Winkler reminded his hearers, empire was the reality for the first 300 years of our faith. "Christianity represented a countercultural force, an alternative faith, and a different way of approaching reality. ... The very existence of a people who worshiped the risen Christ was a symbol of resistance." However, Winkler points out, "all of that changed in 337 A.D. when the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. Suddenly Christians were no longer the persecuted but all too often the persecutors. As the state religion, Christianity was called upon to justify war and empire and the presence of the oppressed and impoverished."



In Jim Winkler's view, many of today's Christians have trouble recognizing that a similar situation still exists. "Most of us," he finds, "don't want to admit that we live in an empire that is an impediment to moving forward to a new era of peace and justice. Rome, too, had a very high opinion of itself and its self-proclaimed mission to bring civilization to the world. What was not acknowledged was the brutal means employed in this campaign and the base motives of conquest and greed."



"Confronting the empire has not been easy nor will it get easier," Jim Winkler like many other Christian leaders assures us, but we need to do it anyway.