

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Empire—still present today

Why do today's Christian Americans need to know what the Roman Empire was like, and how Jesus, Paul, and other early Christians actively resisted it? A big reason is that many well-informed and perceptive observers today are saying that America is the new Roman Empire.



This observation has been made occasionally for at least a hundred and fifty years, but lately it's being made more often and with much more urgency by many of today's Christian thinkers. They're saying that in crucially important ways the twenty-first-century U.S. is like first-century Rome.

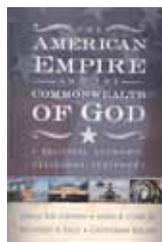
These scholars therefore believe today's U.S. Christians need to be actively resisting much of what our nation is currently doing, just as Jesus and first-century Christians resisted the Roman Empire.



Insights to take seriously

Because the results of failing to resist could be so dire if these thinkers' observations are correct, we need to become aware of them and seriously consider the possibility that they are in fact correct.

In [last month's Connections](#) I quoted two of these scholars, John Dominic Crossan and Joerg Rieger. This issue includes more of their concerns and also some from a recent book of essays by four other scholars. It's *The American Empire and the Commonwealth of God: A Political, Economic, Religious Statement* (Westminster John Knox, 2006). Its authors are David Ray Griffin, who is Jewish, and John B. Cobb Jr., Richard A. Falk, and Catherine Keller, who are Christian. All are current or emeritus professors at major universities or seminaries.



Reconsidering a familiar claim

For years I've seen this quote, whose source is evidently unknown. You've probably seen it too.

"The average age of the world's greatest civilizations from the beginning of history, has been about 200 years. During those 200 years, those nations always progressed through the following sequence: from bondage to spiritual faith; from spiritual faith to great courage; from courage to liberty; from liberty to abundance; from abundance to complacency; from complacency to apathy; from apathy to dependence; from dependence back into bondage."



Our nation passed the 200-year point several years ago and we're still here, so maybe this list doesn't fit. Or maybe we're in bondage but just haven't collapsed yet.

What kind of faith and courage?

Still, many Christians cite the above quote as evidence that America is at death's door and needs to recover what it has lost. But to them, military might seems to be the means for recovering our liberty. Also, they usually seem to be claiming that to recover our spiritual faith we must return to strict adherence to rigid Christian rules, beliefs, and doctrines. That view, however, ignores the religious diversity that existed in the original U.S. It ignores the fact that several of our founders weren't Christian or at least weren't what today's conservative Christians consider orthodox.

Neither doctrine nor military might is what the Christians I quote in this *Connections* mean when they urge us to resist today's empire by more faithfully following Jesus's teaching and example. They are urging us to give up some of the abundance we're used to. They are urging us to stop being complacent and apathetic. They're certainly urging us to become courageous. But the Christian courage they want us to display involves promoting justice and refusing to use violence. That's very different from advocating ancient rules and doctrines and more war.



A different kind of empire

It's hard to realize that our own nation is operating an empire. One reason is that the empire we've known best has been the colonial empire Great Britain had in recent centuries. As Richard Falk observes, thinking only of that kind of empire, along with "overlooking the awkward fact that America did have a few formal colonies," has made it easy to deny that our country rules over an ever-growing empire. In Falk's view, we ignore the fact that American business and political leaders have made "a conscious decision to create a different kind of empire: a neocolonial empire, sometimes called an informal empire."



Also, David Ray Griffin points out, we've gotten our empire through a strategy "which was executed about equally by Republican and Democratic administrations for well over a century." As a result, the imperial way of operating seems normal to us and has crept into all aspects of our society, so goes unnoticed. In Joerg Rieger's view, it reaches "into our collective unconscious and thus into our deepest theological thoughts."



What kind of God?

Especially influential for Christians has been the fact that we've so often heard the imperial way of functioning cloaked in religious language. Rieger warns us, however, that whenever empires try to justify themselves in reference to God, we need to ask what kind of God is being referred to. Christians say they believe God is like Jesus, who taught and modeled compassion, justice, and nonviolence, yet the god our leaders talk about usually seems to be a god of war and of feeling free to overpower others and even be cruel if that's what we think preserving our comfort and safety requires.

Declared goals and real goals

There's often a big gap, too, between what leaders claim our nation's goals are, and what they later turn out to have been. We sometimes discover too late that the main goals for national policies were the wishes of large corporations, of corrupt leaders, or at least of citizens determined to protect their luxuries. Yet leaders make a practice of publicly

claiming that their goal is to carry out the benevolent intentions of God or at least of our nation's founders. This can hide the fact that we've become an empire.



Not benign

If we notice, we tell ourselves that we may be an empire but that unlike the cruel empires we know about from world history, our empire is benign. Its goal, we assure ourselves, is strictly to use our power for doing good.

Many current observers are saying, however, and urgently trying to bring to our attention, that it's not benign to consider ourselves exempt from international policies that we insist are binding on others. We don't want other nations to have nuclear weapons, but we reserve the right to have them. We want other nations to stop polluting, but we don't want to have to stop. That's not a benign attitude.

John Cobb believes that, in addition, economic theory has become our basic theology. We treat wealth as the supreme value. Yet from a Christian point of view, Cobb reminds us, this is wrong. It doesn't consider justice, community, or the natural world. It is not benign.

Not accidental

Besides assuming that our empire is benign, we tend to assume that we've acquired it accidentally. We say that we don't violently or even deliberately take over other nations or groups. Yet critics, including many Christians, point out many groups we've very deliberately taken over, starting with Native Americans and continuing with African slaves, and with invasions of Central and South American countries, installation of right-wing governments in Europe and the Philippines, and helping to oust Palestinians in order to create Israel.

Four kinds of power

Today's American empire has many of the same features that made the Roman Empire powerful. Dominic Crossan uses the findings of sociologist Michael Mann to describe these features. He sees "social power"—power over groups of people—as a combination of four types of power. Crossan sees Rome having used all four



of these types in both violent and nonviolent ways. Its nonviolent power of persuasion was backed up by its violent power of domination and repression.

◆ Military power comes from monopolizing the use of force and violence or at least being able to control it, by having greater military strength than anyone else. The Roman Empire's military power, Crossan tells us, was based on its more than twenty legions, each composed of six thousand fighting engineers who were stationed along all rivers and frontiers. They built the network of roads and bridges that enabled Rome to move quickly throughout its empire and crush any rebellion that might arise anywhere.



◆ Political power comes from monopolizing or controlling the organizational structure of the society. For Rome, this power came through an aristocracy of local elites throughout the empire, who got benefits in return for loyalty to the emperor.

◆ Economic power comes from monopolizing or controlling money, sources of labor, and means of production. Rome's economic power, Crossan finds, came from its network of roads, available for travel and commerce, and from the cash payments made to the legions on all its frontiers. Cobb sees America's dominance of organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and various trade organizations, in addition to its support of multinational corporations, as huge factors in the American empire's economic power. And in his view, "We did not acknowledge to ourselves our complicity and leadership in establishing, through economic policies, a



neocolonial global system ordered largely to our benefit."

◆ Ideological power comes from telling people what to believe, and what events and policies mean. In the Roman Empire this power was created by the imperial theology, which declared the emperor's divine status on coins, buildings, and statues and in stories everyone knew. Crossan feels it is impossible to overestimate the importance of this "glue" that held the empire together. Rieger describes it as being like the air that people in the Roman Empire breathed. The imperial theology, he reminds us, led them to believe that the Empire was willed by the gods and based on the laws of nature.



They came to believe, says Rieger, "that the gods favored them because of their piety and justice, and that an empire based on those values could only be a good thing."

More powerful than Rome

All of these scholars see these same kinds of power being used today by the American empire. Our use of military power is obvious. Much of our economic and political power is obvious, too, and more is evident to those who investigate. So is our empire's ideological power, through leaders' frequent claims of having God's blessing and having only good intentions in all that we do.

In many ways the American empire is much more powerful than Rome's was. The Roman Empire was territorial, Crossan and other scholars remind us, but ours is global.

Actually it's more than global. It's cosmic. Rome's emperors claimed dominion over land and

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.

sea, but we're working diligently to control space too. David Ray Griffin reports that the head of the U.S. Space Command, General Lance Lord—an ominous name—has stated its goal as “space superiority,” which Lord has defined as “freedom to attack as well as freedom from attack.” (And one Space Command program, Griffin tells us, is named “Rods from God”!)



Considering Christian resistance today

With observations like the ones I've quoted here coming from so many well-informed people today,

including many committed Christians, even if our first reaction is to say they're wrong we need to consider seriously the possibility that they're right.

Next month I'll end this series of three *Connections* issues about empire with some Christian thinkers' observations about the contrast between empire and the Kingdom of God. I'll include thoughts about how today's Christians need to resist today's empire, just as Jesus and his early followers resisted the Roman Empire. I hope you'll stay connected.



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Connections

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I was so dismayed by my congregation's use of the name “Centurions” as a title of honor for big givers, which I wrote about in last month's *Connections*, that I didn't think about anything beyond its connection to the Roman Empire as a reason for its being inappropriate. But *Connections* readers have commented on the inappropriateness of using such a system of recognizing givers in the church, no matter how it labels them, and as soon as I read this response I realized, “Of course! That's very important, too!”



We often see institutions using a system that publicizes monetary gifts based on their relative size—“Benefactor, Patron, Supporter,” maybe, or “Diamond, Platinum, Gold, Silver.” Colleges, hospitals, and civic organizations use that method regularly. But it doesn't fit what we claim to believe about giving to the church. Everything we read in the Bible about giving stresses the importance of giving in proportion to one's ability, not the importance of giving a larger amount than others. In the parable of the talents, Jesus advocates making the most productive use of one's God-given resources whether they're large or small. In the story of the widow's mite, he praises the widow for giving the tiny amount that was all she could give. The principle of tithing appears in several places in the Bible. As *Connections* readers rightly observed, the system of recognition I wrote about my church using, in which members who give \$6000 to a church fund-raising campaign are given a special title of honor, contradicts all such teachings.

