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## The Emperor's God Recovering the Lost Message of Jesus

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What is the relationship between human life and the transcendent? What is the meaning of life? These are, of course, questions inherently interesting to philosophers like most of those present at this specifically philosophical conference. The questions are also interesting to people like me, since they are associated with theology, the field I've been working in all of my life. So asking about the meaning of life and its relationship to the transcendent is worthy of theological focus in this meeting of International Philosophers for Peace and for the Elimination of Nuclear and Other Threats to Global Existence.

There is yet another reason why such specifically religious questions should be especially relevant here regardless of our academic disciplines. Religious responses to such ultimate concerns represent a kind of popular philosophy, or theory of life, for many in our culture. I'm referring especially to those who identify themselves as religious conservatives, and who in fact form the backbone of the Republican Party. These typically have no acquaintance with Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant or Sartre. Religious conservatives often know little of the extremely important issues, and would likely have scant appreciation of the acute insights that have been so beneficially discussed in this conference so far. More specifically, it would not be surprising if their knowledge of history, economics, constitutional law, international criminal courts or world parliaments, were almost nil. In other words, for the conservatives I'm referring to, religion rather than philosophy or political analysis provides a sense of life's meaning and the answer to the question, "What then must we do?"

The answer to that last question is about practice, and should be of special concern to us. This is because

the answer often entails exalting nation, fighting wars, rejecting environmental concern, and regarding the vast majority of the human race as "lost," and as the enemy of God. Put otherwise, such understandings of religion, such popular philosophy, themselves represent one of those "other" threats to global existence that the name of our organization says we, its members, are concerned about. I mean, especially in this post-9/11 world, certain understandings of religion threaten to destroy our planet and to kill us all. They should be classified among the "other threats to global existence" beyond nuclear weapons.

With that in mind, I'd like this morning to first of all say a bit more about the danger of received fashionable versions of Christianity as our culture's popular philosophy. Basically it is an imperialistic philosophy. Secondly, my intent is to show how that imperialism is at odds with what we can know about the reputed founder of Christianity, Jesus of Nazareth. He in fact rejected imperialism. The third part of my presentation will show how Christianity became imperialistic. Constantine is the culprit here. Finally, I'll speak a word about recovering the revolutionary thrust of the prophet called the Christ. Essentially, recovery entails identification of the Jesus of history.

### Religion and Philosophy

As Marx indicated, the task of philosophers is to change the world, not simply to interpret it. Changing the world entails expanding perceptions beyond what Plato identified as "doxa," the cultural limits of perception. According to Marx, religion represents the mother of all limits of perception. All analysis therefore should begin with the criticism of religion. For many conserva-

tive Christians religion's immovable parameters of sensitivity include convictions that human beings are basically corrupt, that women should be subordinate to men, that God mercilessly punishes evil doers, that earth's destiny is total destruction (so there's no need to care for the planet), and that they themselves had better obey the 10 Commandments—at least those having to do with sex—or they won't be ready when the Rapture comes.

Despite alleged connections with the Bible, the popular philosophy that is America's religion has little to do with the Bible or with Jesus of Nazareth. It has more to do with the postulates of what John McMurtry has recently identified as “the ruling group mind.” This phrase also refers to intellectual boundaries beyond which most “Americans” simply find themselves unable to think. The limits are powerful. They are set by parents, schools, politicians, teachers, priests and ministers. According to McMurtry, here are the essential elements of American religion:

- An all-powerful, all-knowing and jealous Supreme Power rules the world to realize America's goal --- the liberation of humankind through the spread of the free market.
- By virtue of such divine support, America is the world's leading force for good.
- God's power is especially manifest in the U.S. military whose ability to kill and destroy represents proof of divine favor. (The ruling conviction here is “I can kill; therefore I exist.”)
- To oppose America is evil.
- America's armed forces are necessary to subdue such evil opposition.
- In principle, those forces are incapable of committing crimes as they pursue their goal of fostering freedom, justice and peace.
- “The President of the United States” is the military's “commander in chief,” and the embodiment of “America's leadership of the free world.”
- He occupies “the highest office on earth,” is God's vicar there, and is identical with “America.”
- The project of God, America and its president is achieved by marketizing all that exists.
- It is achieved by spreading “democracy” understood as responding to the consumption preferences which the ruling group-mind shapes by advertising and determines by continuous opinion polls.
- Any other concept of democracy and any other eco-

nomic system are by definition evil.<sup>1</sup>

What then about the stories of Adam and Eve, Noah and the Ark, Abraham and Isaac, Moses and the 10 Commandments, Jesus Christ and his birth, crucifixion, resurrection and promised return? All of these are interpreted within the above convictions of the “ruling group mind.” They are understood to support “America,” and American imperialism. As such, they privilege interpretations governed by the basic faith conviction, “violence saves.”

This conviction is not difficult to support by reference to the Bible—a collection of ancient sources which any rational observer would have to conclude describe and promote for worship a God who could only be described as a pathological killer—a necessary qualification for any God of empire.

Most Americans, of course, would have no difficulty entertaining such thoughts about the God of Islam, the current designated enemy of “America” (even though Islam too claims to find its roots in Abrahamic faith). If I were to say, “any rational reader of the so-called ‘Holy Koran’ would conclude that its God is a pathological killer,” most would simply yawn and ask what else is new?

However if I were to argue, as I do here, that the same statement can be made of entries in the Judeo-Christian “Holy Book,” the reception would not be so warm, especially among believers. Nonetheless, let me say it: any rational person reading the Holy Bible would have to draw the conclusion that the God represented there is essentially violent and destructive, and that he operates as ruthlessly as any emperor might --- and as the United States currently does. In many cases, the biblical God does appear to be a pathological killer. For instance, the One who in a fit of anger repents of having created the world and who destroys nearly all living creatures by flood is a killer. The God who tells the Israelites that he will punish them unless they kill all of their enemy's women, children, and elderly, while destroying their enemy's homes, land and livestock would be judged insane if we were talking about a human being. The God who destroys the earth by a fire that would dwarf the destruction caused by a nuclear war is genocidal. He is a God perfect for empire.

And yet, that's not the only God described in the Bible. There is also the One who takes pity on slaves and who demands their liberation. There is the God who opposes empires like Egypt's, and speaks truth to power as Amos did. There is also the God who exacts

justice for widows, orphans and resident aliens. There is the compassionate God proclaimed by Jesus of Nazareth who receives the Prodigal Son with forgiveness. This God endorses the statement “Put away your sword. Those who live by the sword will die by the sword,” and “You have heard ‘Love your friends and hate your enemies.’ But I say to you, love your enemies; do good to those that hate you; pray for those who persecute you.”

What I’m saying is that there are conflicting understandings of God in the Bible. And some of them have to be wrong, because they are diametrically opposed to others. Expressed alternatively, there is a “battle of Gods” raging within the Judeo-Christian “sacred books.” And the Gods are incompatible with one another. This forces the dilemma succinctly expressed recently by Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, “Either the God of the Bible is a pathological killer, or the Bible is sometimes wrong about God.”<sup>2</sup> It also forces the question, “Who was the God proclaimed by Jesus of Nazareth? Was he the God American Empire and Religion claim as their own, or was he the compassionate God who sides with the poor, the oppressed and all forms of life? Is he the God of life or the God of death?”

### Jesus’ Anti-Imperial God

The position taken here is that the God Jesus proclaimed was revolutionary, not the God of Empire. Jesus also resisted empire specifically.

So much could be said about this; there are so many indications of Jesus’ revolutionary identity throughout the Gospels. For instance, the term “gospel” itself takes a swipe at the Roman Empire. So does the title “Son of God.” “Gospel” (*evangelium*) was the title given to what amounted to the emperor’s “state of the union” message each year. It was an annual account of his *res gestae*, of his wonderful accomplishments on behalf of the empire. “Son of God” was a title claimed by the Caesar himself. However the Gospel of Mark, written by the man who invented that literary form, identifies Jesus as God’s Son, and Jesus’ proclamation of good news specifically to the poor as the genuine Good News. As I said, both literary devices imply criticism and contradiction of empire. They say Jesus is God’s son, not the emperor. The good news is what Jesus proclaimed, not that of the emperor.

There are other Gospel elements that might well be termed “anti-imperial” in Mark. For instance the title “Son of Man” was a revolutionary identification.

Taken from the Book of Daniel, this figure represented the judge of all Israel’s imperial enemies including the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians and Greeks. Also, the fact that Jesus was by all accounts executed by crucifixion indicates that the Romans perceived him as an insurgent. Crucifixion was the mode of capital punishment reserved for revolutionaries.

Then there’s the account in Mark of the Gerasene demoniac (5:1-20). It’s where Jesus encounters a very powerful demon-possessed man who lives among the dead—in the tombs, the most unclean place that a Jew might imagine. The man perceives Jesus as a threat, and his demons within ask permission, rather than being destroyed, to enter a “herd of pigs,” the filthiest animals Jews could conceptualize. Jesus gives the demons leave. They enter the pigs and race headlong over a cliff and into the waters below where they are “drowned in the sea.”

Before giving leave to the demons, Jesus asks them to identify themselves. “My name is Legion,” they reply, “for we are many” (5:9). The identification is significant in terms of understanding Jesus as an anti-imperial. When Mark was writing his gospel, his people, the Jews, were in full blown war with the Romans (66-70 C.E.). In that context, the name “Legion” could have meant only one thing for Mark’s readers—the hated Roman Legions who were killing their brothers and sisters in resistance. Additionally, as Ched Myers tells us in his monumental commentary on Mark, recruits for the Roman Army were called “herds of pigs.”<sup>3</sup> Further still, having the “legion” being “drowned in the sea” would inevitably hark back in the mind of any Jew to Israel’s Exodus experience, where the military hosts of the quintessential imperial enemy, Egypt, were “drowned in the sea” when Moses stretched out his rod. In other words, what we have in the story of the Gerasene demoniac is a symbolic annihilation of the Roman Army by Jesus—clearly a story full of anti-imperial, revolutionary symbolism.

However, the best illustration of Jesus’ resistance to empire is in the famous story of his temptations in the desert. You all know the story. Jesus has just been baptized by John (Mark 1:9-12). A voice has told him that he is somehow the “Son of God” (1:11). He goes out to the desert to discover what that might mean. He prays and fasts for 40 days. Afterwards he’s presented with three temptations. In Matthew’s account of the same story, the culminating temptation is imperial (4:1-11). The devil takes Jesus to a high mountain. He shows

Jesus all the kingdoms of the earth—an empire must vaster than Rome's at the time. Significantly, as we shall see, at this point the “devil” turns into Satan. He says, “All of this can be yours, if only you bow down and worship me. Jesus, of course, refuses. He says, “Be gone, Satan! It is written, the Lord God only shall you adore; him only shall you serve.” Jesus rejected empire in no uncertain terms.

The story's identification of seduction to empire by Satan is important to note because, in the Christian Testament Satan is often identified as the author of empire (e.g. Revelation (13:4). So in the temptation story, Jesus not only refuses empire, he also refuses to worship the “god” of empire, Satan, to whom worship must be given in order for any to attain imperial power.

### How Christianity Became Imperial

Jesus' own opposition to empire is extremely important to understanding how Christianity lost its soul over 1500 years ago, when it became pro-empire. That's what happened to the faith of Jesus under Constantine when Christian “orthodoxy” emerged at the Council of Nicaea in the early 4th century. To put it starkly, it was then that Christians unwittingly began worshipping Satan.

Here's what I mean. Jesus rejected the temptation to empire as we've just seen. But in the 4th century, circumstances made it necessary for the emperor Constantine and his successors to repeat Satan's temptation—this time to the leadership of a faction of the Christian church. Rome would allow Christianity to become the official religion of its Empire. All the Christians had to do was to accept empire, give it religious legitimacy—become the state religion. Jesus had said “no” to a similar temptation. Fourth century church leadership said “yes.” In doing so, in effect those leaders said “yes” to Satan worship—the necessary precondition of accepting empire. They also abandoned the Jesus of history and his this-worldly revolutionary message. In the process, they reduced Jesus to a mythological figure and Christianity to a Roman mystery cult. Let me explain.

Think about the historical circumstances that led Constantine to be concerned with Christianity at all. Like all oppressors, he realized that religion represented an incomparable tool for controlling people. If an emperor can convince people that in obeying him they are obeying God, the emperor has won the day. In fact it is the job of any state religion to make people believe that

God's interests and the state's interests are the same.

What Constantine saw in the 4th century was that Rome's state religion was losing power. Christianity was seen as spreading like wildfire, even though only about 5% of the empire's inhabitants had accepted the new religion. Even so, on the one hand, Christianity was perceived as politically dangerous. Understandably, the message of Jesus was particularly attractive to the lower classes. It affirmed their dignity in the clearest of terms. Often the message incited slaves and others to rebel rather than obey. For centuries, Rome's knee-jerk response had been repression and persecution. But by Constantine's day, Rome's repression had proved ineffective. Despite Rome's throwing Christians to the lions for decade after decade, the faith of Jesus was more popular than ever.

Constantine decided that if he couldn't beat the Christians, he had to join them. And he evidently decided to do so by robbing Christianity of its revolutionary potential. He would do so, he evidently determined, by favoring a segment of the Christian community whose faith was highly influenced by Roman “mystery cults.”

Mystery cults had been extremely popular in Rome. Basically they were “salvation religions” that worshipped gods with names like Isis, Osiris, the Great Mother and Mithra. Mithra was particularly popular. He was the Sun God, whose feast day and birth was celebrated by the way on December 25th. Typically the “story” celebrated in mystery cults was of a god who descended from heaven, lived on earth for a while, died, rose from the dead, ascended back to heaven. From above the deity offered worshippers “eternal life,” if they joined in the cults where the god's body was eaten under the form of bread, and the god's blood was drunk under the form of wine.

To convert Christianity into a mystery cult, Constantine (who wasn't even a Christian at the time) convoked a church council—the Council of Nicaea in 325. There the question of the day became who was Jesus of Nazareth? Was he just a human being? Some believed that militantly. Was he just a God and not a human being at all? Others were just as convinced that Jesus was a God disguised as a human. Was he some combination of God and man? Did he have to eat? Did he have to defecate or urinate? Those were the questions.

For Constantine's purposes, the more divine and otherworldly Jesus was the better. That would make him less a threat to the emperor's very this-worldly dominion.

The result of all the deliberations was codified in what became known as the Nicene Creed. Many of us know it by heart. Roman Catholics recite it nearly every Sunday. Listen to what it says . . . .

*We believe in one God,  
the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all that is, seen and unseen.  
We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, light from light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father;  
through him all things were made.  
For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven,  
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the  
Virgin Mary and became truly human.  
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius  
Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.  
On the third day he rose again  
in accordance with the Scriptures;  
he ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the  
Father.  
He will come again in glory to judge the  
living and the dead, and his kingdom will  
have no end.*

Did you get that? Did you notice what happened there? The Creed jumps from the conception and birth of Jesus to his death and resurrection. It leaves out entirely any reference to what Jesus said and did. For all practical purposes it ignores the historical Jesus and pays attention only to a God who comes down from heaven, dies, rises, ascends back to heaven and offers eternal life to those who believe. It's a nearly perfect reflection of "mystery cult" belief. The revolutionary potential of Jesus' words and actions relative to justice, wealth, poverty and revolution is lost. Not only that, but subsequent to Nicaea, anyone connecting Jesus to a struggle for justice, sharing and communal life is rendered suspect and is very often classified as heretical. That is, mystery cult becomes "orthodoxy." The example and teaching of Jesus (and of the early church) becomes heresy.

### Recovering Jesus' Lost Identity

How are we to recover the revolutionary Jesus? Is there some strategy to overcome the amnesia that has afflicted Christians to such an extent that they have ended up worshipping not Yahweh, but Jupiter, not Jesus, but Mithra—and even Satan? Can we escape from an imperial religion that deifies the United States, its president and army?

There is only one way. That is to recover the "lost middle" of the Nicene Creed—to fill in the blank and make sure that any discussions of faith take into account the Jesus rediscovered in the liberation theology movement and by The Jesus Seminar. Ironically that "lost Jesus" turns out to be the very kind of person conservative Americans tend to reject and actually despise.

Who is this Jesus? He's the son of an unwed teenage mother ... A homeless person at the beginning of his life ... An immigrant in Egypt for a while ... Someone thought irreligious by the "church" authorities of his time, who considered him as demon-possessed (the equivalent of being called a "communist" or "terrorist" in our own day) ... He was under investigation by the Jewish authorities from the very beginning of his life ... Then he was arrested ... A victim of torture ... And of capital punishment. Once again, the nearly perfect portrait of a person hated by the Christian right.

Moreover, Jesus was concerned with remedying poverty and its effects. He healed sick people, fed the hungry, and cast out evil spirits. He announced and embodied a new reality for the poor. In the "reign of God" justice would replace exploitation; the positions of rich and poor would be reversed, and a sharing ethic would take the place of competition and oppression.

This sharing ethic was lived communally (one might say "communistically") by Jesus' earliest followers. Consider the description of their life together:

*Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common\dots. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (Acts 4:32-36).*

As Mexican scripture scholar Jose Miranda indicates, this is a perfect description of communism.<sup>4</sup> That aspiration, he reminds us, doesn't originate with Louis Blanc or with Karl Marx. It comes from the Bible.

Yet most Christians are silent about this passage. They live and speak as though life in the primitive church were instead described as follows:

*Now the whole group of those who believed lived in fierce competition with each other, and made sure that rights to private property were respected. They expelled from their midst any who practiced communalism. As a consequence God's "invisible hand" brought prosperity to some. Many however found themselves in need. The Christians responded with "tough love" demanding that the lazy either work or starve. The unfit, especially the children, the elderly and those who cared for them starved. Others raised themselves by their own bootstraps, and were stronger as a result. In this way, the industrious increased their land holdings, and banked their profits. The rich got richer and the poor, poorer. Of course, all of this was seen as God's will and a positive response to the teaching of Jesus.*

### Conclusion

The points I've raised here should be anything but trivial for philosophers. They represent a plea not to overlook perhaps the most important philosophical strain giving shape to our world today. That strain is the "popular philosophy" represented by religion and its answers to the perennial philosophical questions about the meaning of life and the relationship between human life and the transcendent. This, after all, is what concerned the great fathers of philosophy most famously in 5<sup>th</sup> century Athens.

Philosophical engagement with today's form of imperial religion is necessary to save the world from a religious configuration that threatens to kill us all. In one form or another that arrangement has supported western imperial ambitions and practice for the last 1700 years. In terms familiar to the organization sponsoring this conference, what has come to be accepted as "Christianity" has supported "Nuclear and Other Threats to Global Existence." As such it must be understood, ana-

lyzed and resisted.

I have presented points for incipient analysis by arguing that religion of this type is basically Roman mystery cult. It might even be understood as worship of Satan, who is the biblical patron of empire, and the one whose temptation Jesus programmatically rejected at the outset of his public life. It has little to do with the person and faith of Jesus. Yet it is the closed box within which religious debate takes place today, as though what might be called "Americanism" is identical with the vision proclaimed by Jesus of Nazareth.

I have argued that such distortion of Christianity can be countered only by bursting the bounds of McMurtry's "ruling group mind" by inducing a paradigm shift among American Christian conservatives. That can be accomplished only by restoring the "lost middle" of the Nicene Creed—by recovering the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth, and mining them for their relevance to resisting empire and injustice today. The role of philosophers, in other words, must go beyond refusal to engage in religious dialog. It should instead grasp reigning understandings of Christianity and "problematize" that *de facto* philosophy (as Paolo Freire would put it) for purposes of inducing the culture-wide paradigm shift our contemporary world is straining towards.

In other words, the call here has been to rescue the faith of Jesus from irrelevant, complicated, esoteric and distracting debates about the nature of Jesus, and about whether it was necessary for him to eat, defecate or urinate. Debates about patriotism, school prayer, homosexuality, and evolution are similarly irrelevant and distracting.

Jesus can be convincingly understood as resisting imperialism. That conviction should be part of any debate with believers. The Reign of God Jesus proclaimed was about a new social order in this world. The order he advocated was characterized by justice, sharing and communal life. It recognized that all humans, Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free, are brothers and sisters.

That order is hopeful, and can save us all here and now.

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### Endnotes

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3. Ched Myers. *Binding the Strong Man*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988.
4. Jose Miranda. *Marx and the Bible*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1974.

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