



Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion

**Upsetting the Powers:
Prophetic Christianity in the Context of Empire**

Adam Clark

clarkadam@xavier.edu

Part of *JREER* Volume 1, Issue 13

Resisting Imperial Peace

by the US Ecumenical Association of Third-World Theologians

edited by Michel Andraos and Andrea Smith

The 2008 Presidential campaign marked the re-emergence of black theology in the public sphere for the first time this century. The media's use of Rev. Jeremiah Wright's sermon

statements about chickens coming home to roost and the damnation of America generated a highly visible but poorly framed discourse on black theology.

The public reaction to Wright was swift and intense. Despite adamant appeals to biblical texts, Wright was not heard as channeling Hebrew prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. He was regarded as anti-white, anti-American and un-Christian. What's missed by pundits and commentators is that Wright's ability to upset, unsettle, and enrage citizens of Empire parallels biblical prophets who indicted ruling elites and called for communal renewal.

This prophetic energy gave birth to liberation theologies forty years ago. Theologies of liberation argue that recovering excluded voices, defending the poor, prioritizing liberation and critiquing Empire are necessary translations of biblical faith in the modern world. Modern ideologies of racism, capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy and homophobia are antithetical to biblical faith. The aim of this paper is to enter into this tradition by discussing the Jeremiah Wright controversy within the context of black theology. Many critics and commentators do not see Jeremiah Wright as advancing black theology but discrediting it. The public beat down, death threats and character assassination Wright faced ought to scare people from embracing his religious and political perspectives. These observations reveal how unaware most Americans are that Wright's social martyrdom fits into a long history of prophetic Christian thought.

Theologians such as Leonardo Boff, Jon Sobrino, Tissa Balasuriya, and Sebastian Kappen were either censured or excommunicated for their liberationist approaches. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., Oscar Romero, and Engleberg Mveng spoke truth against imperial power and were assassinated. Their witnesses were not reduced but enhanced by their stances. It

is from this perspective that I use Jeremiah Wright to discuss the meaning of black theology as a prophetic faith in context of Empire.

This paper situates Jeremiah Wright within the black theological tradition and makes use of Walter Brueggeman's concepts of prophetic criticizing and prophetic energizing to discuss Wright's public discourse during the 2008 presidential campaign.¹ I begin by discussing that before the widely circulated you-tube clips gleaned national attention, Wright entered into the arena of presidential politics as Obama's radical pastor through the *Hannity and Colmes* TV show. Wright put forth an image of Christianity as an anti-imperial faith from a black theological perspective. Since this image caused so much controversy, I discuss its historical and biblical grounds and contrast it against the public meaning of American Christianity. I conclude by discussing Wright's sermon and public addresses as examples of prophetic criticizing and prophetic energizing.

Unashamedly Black, Unapologetically Christian

Before the widely circulated YouTube clips in 2008, Wright's foray into the spotlight of presidential politics occurred in March 2007 when Fox News commentator Sean Hannity interviewed conservative columnist Eric Rush about Trinity United Church. Irked by the perception of unfair treatment of Mitt Romney's Mormon faith, they sought to discredit candidate Obama on religious grounds. They seized on Trinity's motto Unashamedly Black, Unapologetically Christian. Trinity's stress on blackness alarmed these commentators. Rush

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978)

likened Trinity's Church vision to a separatist cult. "I would go beyond saying that they're Afrocentric. They're African-centric. They refer to themselves as an African people, and that somewhat disturbs me from the viewpoint of, well, do they consider themselves Americans? Do they consider themselves Christians? Are they worshipping Christ? Are they worshipping African things black? Well, I mean, what is it?"² he stated.

They went on to discuss Trinity's black value system which features conservative values such as a commitment to black community, black family and black work ethic. In a fair minded tone, Hannity remarked, "If you substitute the word "black" for the word "white," there would be an outrage in this country."³

Wright appeared on the Hannity and Colmes program the following day to defend his church. Wright is well aware that affirming blackness is not the moral equivalent to affirming whiteness in the United States. The affirmation of blackness is valuing black history and culture in a society that denigrates it, affirming whiteness is espousing white supremacy. Wright responds to Hannity's badgering by placing his Afrocentric approach within the context of black and liberation theology. He explains, "The African-centered point of view does not assume superiority, nor does it assume separatism. It assumes Africans speaking for themselves as subjects in history, not objects in history."⁴

² See Hannity and Colmes, March 1, 2007. "Obama's Pastor: Rev. Jeremiah Wright" (<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,256078,00.html>)

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

For black theological interpreters, blackness has historical and symbolic meaning. Wright emphasizes the historical—blacks as subjects and not objects of history. But the symbolic has more import for prophetic Christianity. Blackness, symbolically, resists empire and affirms the liberation of the poor. It offers a new paradigm for reassessing biblical witness. To be unapologetically Christian, from a black theological perspective, is have one's identity bound to God's solidarity with the poor. Wright ends the interview by reprimanding Hannity and admonishing him to read theologies from the underside such as the works of James Cone and Dwight Hopkins, and womanist, Asian, and Latin American liberation theologians.

An Anti-Imperial Faith

The conception of Christian identity espoused by Wright and black theologians runs counter to its public meaning in the United States. Faith in Jesus Christ is identified with being anti- gay, anti- abortion and pro-war. Jesus who was flogged and crucified by Roman Empire becomes synonymous with American. Wright and Black theologians disrupt dominant cultural narratives and read Christianity as an anti-imperial faith.

From this perspective, the paradigmatic story of the Hebrew Bible reveals a God who is against Empire. Exodus depicts a Hebrew people who were conquered and enslaved within Egyptian Empire. They were treated brutally, endured oppression and hardship under Egypt's domination system. Despite Egypt's long tradition of viewing Pharaohs as reflections of God's image, Hebrews regarded Pharaoh as slave master and Moses as liberator. Exodus narrates a God

who enters history, opposes Egyptian Empire and liberates oppressed Hebrews from imperial tyranny.

This anti-imperial strand continues throughout the Bible. Oppression and tyranny are not exclusive to Egyptian Empire but aspects of the human condition. Their persistence and adaptability are demonstrated as the Hebrews transform from a nomad people into a monarchical society. The Israelite kingship structure mimicked Egyptian rule. Israelite kings treated their people just as bad as Pharaoh, inspiring the rise of prophets to critique the oppressive state of affairs. Amos, Jeremiah, Micah, Isaiah rose to subvert unjust regimes and announce God's new order. Their vision of God's order was at radical odds with imperial formations. It opposed violence and the mistreatment of the poor and affirmed peace. Prophets such as Isaiah and Micah reveal a God who wills a just and peaceable world "They will beat their swords in ploughshares" intones Isaiah "and their spears into pruning hooks; nations shall not lift their sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore" (Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3).

Israel fell under a succession of foreign empires after the sixth century, just as Africans would later fall under European empires. The God of Israel admonished the Hebrews to reject domination systems of Babylon, Persian, Macedonian, Egyptian, Assyrian, Roman and return to the ways of the Lord just as black theologians urged blacks to reject the God of their captors.

The story and message of Jesus is also anti-imperial. According to biblical testimony, the imperial powers conspire to kill Jesus just as they did Moses. Titles such as Son of God, Lord, God from God, Savior and Bringer of Peace on earth, which were exclusively associated with Caesar Augustus, functioned as counter-narratives when applied to a Jewish peasant. Jesus'

proclamation of God's Kingdom contrasts the Kingdoms of Herod and Caesar. These hierarchical regimes are rejected as Jesus discloses an alternative way—God's domination free order—where evil is overcome and the redeemed community restored. Jesus preaching of the kingdom was seen as being so dangerously subversive that it merited empire's most terrifying act—crucifixion.

Contemporary Christians identify God's blessings with acquiring the social goods of empire—prestige, financial security and personal comfort. This image of faith is a far cry from the early followers of Jesus who understood loyalty to God as opposition to Empire. Stalwarts of the faith such as John the Baptist were so disruptive to political order that he was beheaded. Peter, the earliest leader of the Christian movement, was crucified upside down because he felt unworthy to be executed in the same manner as his Lord. Paul also appears to have been beheaded in Rome. For these early Christian leaders, saying Yes to Jesus meant saying No to Empire.

The Constantinian Turn

If Jesus was so adversarial to Empire, why do contemporary Christians endorse it? How did this anti-imperial faith become the dominant religion of Western Empires? Christianity was not legally recognized within the Roman Empire until the fourth century. Prior to that, it was regarded by many as morally objectionable, politically subversive, and intellectually indefensible.

On October 27 in 312, the Roman general Constantine was set to square off against the army of general Maxentius at the Tiber River for the imperial throne of Rome. Greatly

outnumbered, Constantine knew his army could not contend with Maxentius so he sought a higher power. According to Eusebius, Constantine had a vision of “a cross shaped trophy formed from light” with the inscription “By this I Conquer.” He defeated Maxentius and was able to consolidate power as ruler of the Roman Empire.

Constantine attributed his victory to the intervention of Christ and became Christian. He reversed his predecessor Diocletian’s edict of 303 that formally criminalized Christianity and replaced it with the edict of Milan in 313 that affirmed religious tolerance. Constantine’s action stopped the repression and murder of Christians that had gone on since the mid-first century. Christianity finally received the legitimacy and respectability it long desired but at great cost. The emergence of Christianity as the religion of empire led to a tragic loss of its prophetic and subversive power.

This loss of prophetic power occurred for two primary reasons. First off, Constantine’s pursuit of Christian unity justified violence against non-Christian groups. Religious unity is an important part of the politics of empire. Constantine called together the Council of Nicaea in 325 to produce binding decrees throughout the Christian world. It established doctrinal orthodoxy on the deity of Christ and gave us the Nicene Creed. For Constantine, one empire had to have one religion. However, the codification of this strict monotheism justified vicious persecutions against pagans and Jews. Persecutions of non-Christians became normative within Constantinian Empire. Christians did not love their non-Christian neighbors as themselves, regrettably they treated non-Christian, especially Jews, in the same manner they were treated in the pre-Constantinian era.

Secondly, Constantine's use of military and political violence compromised the integrity of the faith. Since Constantine believed that Jesus sided with him in a bloody battle, he associated the cause of Christ with military and political victory. He used his imperial authority to usurp religious authority. Constantine appointed himself bishop over the Church. Since he was already chief priest of Roman paganism, he easily extended this title to Christianity. The violence and brutality used to consolidate and expand empire as "chief priest" undermined the gospel of liberation. Moreover, since God favored Roman Empire, political dissent was forbidden. Constantine legitimized persecuting and sometimes executing anyone who opposed the imperial policies. This tragic identification between Church and State gave moral license to subsequent political regimes to act brutally in the name of Christ. In this way, the Constantinian regime transformed the prophetic faith of Jesus into a validating agency for princes, prime ministers and presidents who sought to silence struggles for freedom. The voice of the Church became identified with the voice of Empire and the legacy of the anti-imperial Christ was marginalized.

American Christianity and the Politics of Empire

Cornel West reminds us that American Christianity has two dominant strands—a Constantinian strand and a prophetic strand. The prophetic heritage is at odds with Empire: it represents Jesus' message of love and justice and revitalizes energies to be agents in the creation of a good and just world. The Constantinian tradition is complicit with Empire: it is a deeply authoritarian tradition that fuses the interest of the church with the interest of the State. West

states, “This terrible merger of the church and state has been behind so many of the church’s worst violations of Christian love and justice---from barbaric crusades against the Jews and Muslims, to horrors of the Inquisitions and the ugly bigotry against women, people of color, and gays and lesbians.”⁵ Jeremiah Wright and the black theological community are part of the prophetic tradition, however, America’s public and political culture are shaped by Constantinian sensibilities.

The most visible and vocal expression of Constantinian Christianity in America is the Christian Right. It is the pro-imperial voice of American Empire and George W. Bush is its champion. The imperial sensibilities of the Bush administration were set in place long before Bush took office. America’s grand strategy for permanent Empire was developed by people such as Paul Wolfowitz and Dick Cheney in 1992 under Defense Planning Guidance.⁶ This plan laid out a strategy for reshaping US foreign policy in a world where the US was no longer challenged by Soviet power.

The election of George W. Bush put a person in office that sacralized these strategies. He fuses the mission of American empire with God’s purposes in true Constantinian fashion. American presidents have historically made references to God, however Bush’s use was distinctive. Abraham Lincoln worried earnestly about America being on God’s side while Bush was confident that God was on America’s side. God’s sovereignty, from Bush’s perspective, spanned the world but God’s blessings were special for America. His politics of empire have a

⁵ Cornel West, *Democracy Matters* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 147-150.

⁶ Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Saving Christianity from Empire* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 51-53.

deeply religious undergirding, America is conceived of being inherently good with “calls,” “missions”, “charges to keep”, and even “wonder-working powers.”

From Bush’s perspective, America in a post-September 11 world is involved in a pitched battle between good and evil and those who are not with America are on the wrong side of the confrontation. “Our responsibility to history is already clear” states Bush “to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil.”⁷ As the leader of the most lethal empire in human history, Bush sees himself as God’s emissary and believes that US military power is an instrument of God’s justice. According to this logic, Americans are God’s new chosen people, on a mission to rid the world of evil. “Mother Teresa with a Gun”⁸ one writer refers to it. “...a world at peace” according to Bush’s advisors “... if it ever does come...will be brought into being by American armed might and defended by American might too.”⁹

The use of violence to maintain human empires is legitimated by the myth of redemptive violence. According to Walter Wink, this myth is the dominant myth that maintains empires from Constantine to Obama “... it enshrines the belief that violence saves, that war brings peace, that might makes right.”¹⁰ Wink argues that “The Myth of Redemptive Violence is the official religion of Empire.... It is the ideology of conquest, the original religion of the status quo...” The Bush administration embodied this myth, “By divine right the state has the power to demand

⁷ See George Bush, “ National Day of Prayer Remarks September 14th 2001,” at National Cathedral (<http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/gwbush911prayer&memorialaddress.htm>)

⁸ Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Saving Christianity from Empire*, 17.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰ Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 42.

that its citizens sacrifice their lives to maintain that privilege enjoyed by the few. By divine decree, it uses violence to cleanse the world of enemies of state.”¹¹

One can notice the power of this myth by observing America’s response to war. Given the long tradition of Christian teaching forbidding aggressive and preemptive wars, shouldn’t Christians been in the streets outraged about the invasions of Iraq, demanding that it violated the central tenants of faith? Why isn’t there as much passion around issues of war and peace as there are around abortion and gay marriage? Such strange positioning by the church demonstrates the marginalization of prophetic thought and the imperial captivity of the church.

The Underside of Empire

American Christianity is captive to Constantinian tradition or Christianity from above, however the prophetic legacy of the black church views Christianity from below. Its perspective is from the underside of history, a history marked by mass suffering more than political and military triumph. Jeremiah Wright is one of the most creative interpreters of the black theological tradition. “The best representation of black liberation theology,”¹² according to James Cone.

While first generation black theologians used black power to re-interpret faith, Wright uses Afrocentricity. Afrocentricity grounds faith in the experiences of the black poor and proclaims the Black Christ as liberator, black people as reflections of the imago dei and blacks as present in the biblical story. It functions as a pedagogy of the oppressed—a form of conscientization that helps blacks seize and reshape their reality.

¹¹ Ibid., 57.

¹² Kelefa Sanneh, “[Project Trinity: The perilous mission of Obama’s church](#),” *New Yorker*, April 7, 2008.

The mission statement of Trinity United Church of Christ, Wright's former church, reads:

We are a congregation which is Unashamedly Black and Unapologetically Christian... Our roots in the Black religious experience and tradition are deep, lasting and permanent. We are an African people, and remain "true to our native land," the mother continent, the cradle of civilization¹³

For African-centered Christians, black history is a primary realm of meaning and purpose and the site of divine activity. God is active, in liberating and goal-orientated way in black history in culture. Wright's use of Afrocentricity makes the gospel culturally and politically relevant. His perspective shares a family resemblance with other liberationist traditions that engage Christian faith. Similar to other liberationist, he views the gospel through the eyes of the poor, as a critique of social reality, as necessitating an epistemological break, as siding with the oppressed, understands Christ as redeemer and liberator, stresses practice and energizes believers to be agents of good and just world.

The Jeremiah Wright Controversy Revisited

Jeremiah Wright's impassioned sermons sparked a national controversy during the presidential elections of 2008. For liberation theology, controversy is nothing new. Many of its chief exponents have been reprimanded for upsetting religious and political orthodoxies.

Theologians such as Leonardo Boff, Jon Sobrino, and Tissa Balasuriya have been censured and

¹³ Taken from www.tucc.org.

silenced, others such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr., Oscar Romero, Engleberg Mveng, Dorothy Stang have been murdered. What's different about Jeremiah Wright is that the public censure was not from religious hierarchy, he received his reprimand and penalty from political elites on the right and the left. Nevertheless, he represents liberation theologies first public confrontation with American empire in the twenty-first century. This encounter and its legacy offer insights into how black theology can function as a prophetic faith in twenty-first century America.

Since Wright's most famous parishioner, Senator Barack Obama, was running for president, in March 2008, ABC News reviewed dozens of Rev. Wright's sermons and found what they regarded as denigrating statements about America. The two most provocative remarks were: "The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law and then wants us to sing 'God Bless America.' No, no, no, God damn America, that's in the Bible..." extracted from a 2003 sermon. The second controversial remark was taken from a Sept. 16, 2001 sermon, Wright preached: "We have supported state terrorism against the Palestinians and black South Africans, and now we are indignant because the stuff we have done overseas is now brought right back to our own front yards. America's chickens are coming home to roost."

What's important to understand is that these sermons were initially delivered by a black preacher addressing a black congregation. The language, grammar, code, symbolism, short-hand and intonation used was intended for an audience who was intimately familiar with Wright and

the black religious tradition. Once these sermons were lifted from their initial context and analyzed as campaign slogans, their meaning was distorted and capitalized on for political gain.

James Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* is useful for understanding Wright. Scott deals with how unequal power relationships between dominant and subordinate groups are negotiated through social transcripts. He defines these transcripts as public and hidden scripts. Scott uses the term *public transcript* to describe open, public interactions between dominators and the oppressed and *hidden transcript* for critiques of power that go on offstage, where dominant groups and power holders do not see or hear. The dominant public scripts, such as campaign speeches, are heavily policed, staged and controlled by the powerful. They strategically conceal or remove subversive or challenging discourses and define terms of debate through euphemism and stigma. Hidden scripts within black culture resist and delegitimize the powerful by critiquing stories that celebrate their victories (i.e. critiques of national mythologies.) They create alternative discourses and psychic spaces that validate perceptions of the less powerful. Within oppressed communities, hidden transcripts are expressed openly but in disguised forms. In black life, we might interpret folktales, songs, gestures, barber and beauty shop conversations, spoken word, jokes (i.e. the dozens), hip hop culture, black-talk radio and black sermons as vehicles through which critiques of power and alternative accounts of reality are established.

Many of Wright's defenders liken his sermons to the black jeremiads of Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr. These public addresses and sermons critique society for its misdeeds and challenge the nation to correct its behavior by trying to live up to its divine

mandate. A strong case can be made for this observation, however, jeremiads, in the main, are public scripts. Wright sermons are hidden scripts, off stage critiques of power and alternative accounts of reality by a black preacher to a black audience. These scripts as well as his later public discourse are prophetic fragments that point to oppositional ways faith functions within empire.

At the heart of the prophetic tradition is the affirmation that faithfulness to God means resistance to empire. Prophetic faith entails two things—prophetic criticizing and prophetic energizing.¹⁴ Prophetic criticizing critiques the dominant consciousness and culture of a society. Wright critiques the dominant narratives of American empire, its myths of redemptive violence and notions of American promise and innocence. Prophetic energizing expressed God’s promise for a new future. Wright energizes people to be agents of a good and just community.

Prophetic Criticizing

The controversial excerpts that gained national attention were taken from two sermons: one titled “The Day of Jerusalem’s Fall,” delivered on September 16, 2001, and another, titled “Confusing God and Government,” delivered on April 13, 2003. After the sermon-snippets were publicly broadcast, the media depicted Wright as a race-baiter and a hate-monger. Yet a proper assessment of these snippets in their full context demonstrates how they function as examples of prophetic criticism.

¹⁴ Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*.

In the aftermath of September 11, a traumatized nation turned to its religious leadership to be comforted and make sense of what happened. Worship services around the country had prayers and sermons that expressed sympathy and compassion for those who were killed and their families. Many Americans had deep-seated anger and strong desires for revenge. They were convinced that the imperial narrative was true: America was a victim of unprovoked attacks by a foreign entity who was jealous of their freedom. Against the frenzy of flag waving and national propaganda, Wright evoked a dangerous memory—an alternative account of empire from the underside. The attacks, he believed, were not driven by jealousy and envy, but were a consequence of America's involvement in a cycle of violence. Violence does not lead to safety and security, it multiplies and reproduces more violence. Wright preached from Psalms 137 in order to upset notions of American innocence and counter her lust for revenge. The text reads:

By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” How could we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem’s fall, how they said, “Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!” O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock! (Psalm 137:1-9)

According to Wright, America's lust for war parallels the people of faith who warred against Babylon. The passage depicts Israelites who begin by hating the armies of the enemy and wound up hating the army of innocents. The passage levels a prophetic critique against violence. Wright brings to memory Israel's communal lament against Babylon. "Blessed are they who dash your baby's brains against a rock." preaches Wright "And that, my beloved, is a dangerous place to be, yet that is where the people of faith are in 551 BC, and that is where far too many people of faith are in 2001 AD." He explains, "We have moved from the hatred of armed enemies to the hatred of unarmed innocents. We want revenge, we want paybacks, and we don't care who gets hurt in the process."¹⁵

Wright's concern is that America is losing her soul by becoming the evil she opposes. The widely circulated snippets of Wright claiming America's response is a case of the chickens coming home to roost is a reference first made by Ambassador Peck. It echoed Malcolm's famed remarks about the cycle of violence that killed John F. Kennedy. Peck and Malcolm are not trashing America but offering insights for a less violent future. In political terms, this is referred to as blowback. Blowback is a term that means oftentimes covert governmental operations overseas have unintended violent consequences for civilians back home. Peck is trying to say that America's covert violence overseas eventually comes to light on her own shores.

¹⁵See Bill Moyers Journal, April 25, 2008. (<http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/04252008/transcript1.html>)

Wright's sermon is a response to the mythology of violence that Americans are deeply wedded to. Violence does not solve problems, it adds to the atmosphere of fear and hostility. Wright would agree with Walter Wink's claim that the myth of redemptive violence has displaced Christianity as the dominant religion of our society. "Violence appears to be the nature of things. It's what works. It seems inevitable, the last and, often, the first resort in conflicts." Within America, violence becomes god-like. "If a god is what you turn to when all else fails, violence certainly functions as a god."¹⁶

Wright does not want to launch a direct attack against narratives of American promise and innocence. In sermonic form, he's able to critique, poke holes, gives alternative accounts of the underside of American promise. American promise and values are associated with democratic processes such as voting, free press, free speech however they has been created and maintained through violence—especially violence against populations of color from Native Americans to Iraqis. Wright preaches:

We took this country, by terror, away from the Sioux, the Apache, the Arawak, the Comanche, the Arapajo, the Navajo. 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 and killed innocent civilians - babies, non-military personnel. We bombed the black civilian community of Panama with stealth bombers and killed unarmed teenagers, and toddlers, pregnant mothers and hard working fathers. We bombed Gadafy, his home and killed his child. Blessed be they who bash your children's head against the rocks. [*reference to Psalm 137*] We bombed Iraq, we killed unarmed civilians trying to make a living. We bombed the plant in Sudan to pay back for the attack on our embassy—killed hundreds of

¹⁶ Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be*, 42.

hard-working people—mothers and fathers, who left home to go that day, not knowing they'd never get back home. We bombed Hiroshima, we bombed Nagasaki and we nuked far more than the thousands 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. ...

We have supported state terrorism against the Palestinians and black South Africans, and now we are indignant? Because the stuff we have done overseas is brought back into our own front yards. *America's chickens are coming home to roost.* Violence begets violence. Hatred begets hatred, and terrorism begets terrorism.¹⁷

Undoubtedly, Wright would use different language to make his point had this been a public address. However, since communication was between a black preacher and his congregation, this should be regarded as a hidden script—an offstage critique of dominant historical narratives. His point is that the violence that America has sowed, so shall she reap. He uses Psalm 127 to argue that God does not want revenge but redemption. America's militaristic response was rooted in vengeance. God wants to make us whole. We do not become whole, according to Wright, by declaring war against other countries, we become whole by declaring war against racism, injustice, and greed.

The second sermon that received wide-spread circulation occurred almost two years after the attack and a month after the invasion of Iraq. The initial support for war was high despite the objections of most Christian congregations except white evangelicals. Nonetheless, many

¹⁷See "The Day of [Jerusalem's](#) Fall" 9/16/2001 (<http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/story?id=4719157&page=1>)

Americans equated love of God and country with support for the policies of the Bush administration and identified meaningful dissent with sympathizing with terrorists and blaming America.

Wright's sermon on "Confusing God and Government" delivered April 13, 2003 upset the easy and uncritical identification between God and government. Wright re-narrates the actions of government from the underside. Certain forms of patriotism and nationalism border on idolatry. In this sermon, Wright warns that governments should not be invested with the same kind of authority as God because governments lie, change and fail. He continues:

The Government lied about Pearl Harbor. They knew the Japanese were going to attack. Governments lie! The Government lied about the Gulf of Tonkin – they wanted that resolution to get us into the Vietnam War. Governments lie! ...

The Government lied about the Tuskegee experiment; they purposely infected African-American men with syphilis. Governments lie!...

The Government lied about a connection between Al-Qaida and Saddam Hussein, and a connection between 9/11/01 and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Governments lie! The Government lied about Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq being a threat to the United States' peace. And guess what else? If they don't find them some Weapons of Mass Destruction, they're going to do just like that LAPD and plant them some Weapons of Mass Destruction. Governments lie!

Not only do governments lie, but governments fail. They've failed at treating blacks fairly.

The government put them in slave quarters, put them on auction blocks, put them in cotton fields, put them in inferior schools, put them in substandard housing, put

them in scientific experiments, put them in the lowest paying jobs, put them outside the equal protection of the law, kept them out of their racist bastions of higher education and locked them into position of hopelessness and helplessness. The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law, and *then wants us to sing “God Bless America.” No, no, no. Not “God Bless America”; God Damn America! That’s in the Bible, for killing innocent people. God Damn America for treating her citizens as less than human. God Damn America as long as she keeps trying to act like she is God and she is supreme!*¹⁸

Wright’s impassioned language gives an alternative account of government and its relation to people of color. He channels the tradition of eight century Hebrew prophets such as Amos, Hosea, Micah and Isaiah who used homiletical strategies to call a nation to judgment and renewal. They delivered speeches against the nations of Israel and Judah and their rulers because of the ways they oppressed the poor, distorted justice, and ignored the ethical imperatives of their religion. Wright continues in this vein by evoking God’s judgment against America’s history of racism and violence. The damn in God Damn America was interpreted by the mainstream as a curse word, not a biblical injunction. Wright explains, “ God doesn’t bless everything. God condemns something. And D-E-M-N, demn, is where we get the word damn. God damns some practices.”¹⁹

¹⁸ See Reverend Wright Transcript. “Confusing God and Government” 4/13/03 (<http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/story?id=4719157&page=2>)

¹⁹ See Bill Moyers Journal, April 25, 2008. (<http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/04252008/transcript1.html>)

From Hidden to Public Scripts

ABC's *Good Morning America* was the first program to make Wright sermons (hidden scripts) public scripts. They played four short video-clips of "controversial statements" such as Wright "Damning America" and statements such as "chickens are coming home to roost." The reaction was swift and unrestrained. Political pundits and commentators did not regard Wright's statements as examples of prophetic criticizing or anything that resembles biblical truth. They interpreted them through the lens of campaign politics. Predictably, the anti-Obama voices on the right such as the *National Review* called them "anti-American, racist rantings," Michelle Malkin referred to Wright as a "grievance-mongering preacher animated by the voracity of hate," Shelby Steele stated that the remarks were "hate-filled, anti-American black nationalism," and Charles Krauthammer referred to them as "black hate speech" and "racist rants."

Not to be outdone, voices on the left were equally as acerbic. *New York Times* referred to them as "bigoted and paranoid rantings," Bob Herbert "histrionics of a loony preacher from the South Side of Chicago," Patricia Williams "jibberjabber from the crazy ex-minister," Cynthia Tucker called them a "race-baiting diatribe," and Frank Rich characterized them as "ranting" from a "fire-breathing pastor."

Obama's presidential campaign aimed to create a new governing coalition for the twenty-first century. For many, Obama wasn't merely a politician but a transformative leader—one that brings people together across racial, class, geographic and party lines. Once Wright's remarks became public, it divided and undermined Obama's new coalition. Obama initially denounced

the remarks and distance himself from Wright. But as pundits and much of the public refused to disassociate Wright's remarks with Obama's campaign, so he decided to make more formal address.

On March 18, 2008, Senator Barack Obama addressed the controversy by delivering a speech titled "A More Perfect Union." Obama framed his response in terms of broader issues of race in the United States. Obama made the case that Wright and Trinity United Church of Christ had been misrepresented by "the snippets of those sermons that have run in an endless loop on the television and YouTube." He spoke of Wright's service to the poor and needy, and of the role Wright played in his own journey to Christianity. Wright's sermonic statements were not treated as expressions of prophetic criticism. Obama accepted the dominant cultures rendering of Wright as a political actor—one unacceptable to mainstream sensibilities. Wright's views, according to Obama, were "not only wrong but divisive... at a time when we need unity." He explained:

The profound mistake of Reverend Wright's sermons is not that he spoke about racism in our society. It's that he spoke as if our society was static; as if no progress has been made; as if this country — a country that has made it possible for one of his own members to run for the highest office in the land and build a coalition of white and black; Latino and Asian, rich and poor, young and old — is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past.

Obama joined Wright's denouncers in not hearing his remarks as critiques of unjust power.

They weren't simply a religious leader's effort to speak out against perceived injustice. Instead, they expressed a profoundly distorted view of this country — a view that sees white racism as endemic, and that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America...

Obama's sunny-side conception of America contrasts Wright's perspective from the underside. While Wright views racism as embedded in American culture, Obama understands racism as an anomaly and not endemic. He envisions a national culture that produces working alliances and coalitions between liberals and conservatives, gay and straight, black, brown and white, and where people from red states get along with people from blue states. For Obama, what unites Americans is far more important than what divides.

In Obama's America, whites do not have to confess or repent from their complicity with structures of oppression for racial reconciliation to occur. They merely have to realize that their dreams do not have to come at the expense of people of color. Reconciliation comes by acknowledgement and addressing of the legacy of discrimination. "...Not only with words but with deeds by reinvesting in our schools and our communities; by enforcing our civil rights laws and ensuring fairness in our criminal justice system; by providing this generation with ladders of opportunity that were unavailable for previous generations."

For blacks, racial reconciliation is advanced not by overcoming mis-education about themselves but by taking personal responsibility and forming coalitions. Blacks must bind their "... particular grievances—for better health care, and better schools, and better jobs—to the larger aspirations of all Americans—the white woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man whose been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family."

While Obama's vision is a dramatic change from the past, it doesn't go far enough. Whites are asked to acknowledge the legacy of discrimination and reinvest in the public good. Blacks are told to strengthened their personal initiative and be more open to coalition building.

Both are middle class assumptions. While Obama sees the middle class as the backbone of his political vision, Wright sees the poor as the backbone of God's kingdom. God's kingdom is for the poor, the rejected, the despised and the marginalized. For Wright and black theology, any political vision that discusses national reconciliation and the formation of moral communities must champion this perspective.

Prophetic Energizing

After Obama's "More Perfect Union" speech, the controversy began to fade but was renewed in late April of 2008. Wright made a series of media appearances including an interview on Bill Moyers Journal, a speech at the NAACP, and a speech at the National Press Club. Wright switches from the *prophetic criticizing* of his sermons at Trinity to *prophetic energizing* in the public sphere—energizing people's thinking and behavior to become agents of a new community—a community of hope where freedom and justice abound. Creating a new community entails risk-taking. Wright challenges his public to risk being liberated, risk being transformed, and risk reconciliation.

In sermonic hidden scripts, Wright was critical of American imperial power but in public scripts, his vision is closer to Martin Luther King, Jr. King's metaphor of The World House is useful in understanding Wright's public addresses. King outlines this metaphor in his final book where he anticipates diversity as "a great new problem of mankind."

We have inherited a large house, a great 'world house' in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture

and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must lean somehow to live with each other in peace.²⁰

King defines the moral challenge of his age as not being a choice between black or white but between chaos or community, we either live together as brothers and sisters or perish together as fools. For King, the world house is a total integrated human family, unconcerned with human differences and devoted to the ethical norms of love, justice and community. In Wright's public appearances, he invited us to risk getting out of our comfort zones and creating a multicultural and pluralistic society—one reflective of God's will. In April, Wright eagerly combatted being caricatured as an anti-white hate monger, the Willie Horton of 2008. He argues that he's a preacher not a politician. His commitment is to the gospel, not a presidential campaign. And despite media depictions of being hostile to whites, Wright never rejected racial reconciliation: "I am not one of the most divisive [people in the country] . . . the word is descriptive. I describe the conditions in this country. Conditions divide, not my descriptions."²¹ Wright instructs audiences that the black prophetic tradition has a long history of supporting racial reconciliation. "The prophetic theology of the black church is a theology of liberation; it is a theology of transformation; and it is ultimately a theology of reconciliation."

The difference between Wright's vision of the new community and mainstream conceptions of a good society is that Wright insists repentance and reexamination precedes genuine community. He explains that his vision is comparable to Jim Wallis'. "Jim Wallis

²⁰ Martin Luther King Jr, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos of Community?*, (

²¹ Transcript of Wright's Speech to the NAACP, Monday April 28, 2008, (<http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/04/28/wright.transcript/>)

[Founder of Sojourners Magazine, a progressive Christian publication] says America's sin of racism has never even been confessed, much less repented for....” And Wright agrees. He is driven by biblical priorities, not electoral necessities. He interprets biblical messages through the lens of the black struggle not American empire.

Wright argues that America must be upset from her comfort zones and risk being liberated from her racial captivity. He attempts to liberate people from racist thoughts and ideas in order to for them to treat each other rightly. While Obama envisions racism as an aberration, Wright understands racism as deeply embedded in the psychological, cultural and economic structures of American culture. Wright's thinking is similar to black religious scholars such as Robert Hood who argue that the primal cultural myths of the West are so thoroughly constituted by anti-black sentiments that egalitarian religious and civic ideals are unattainable. In *Begrimed and Black* Hood traces negative associations about blackness to Greco-Roman and biblical sources. He states:

Racism may be so deeply embedded in the Christian tradition and subsequent historical cultural myths that even modern religious doctrines as well as civil ideals about equality and inclusiveness are sabotaged and unrealizable.²²

This mythic and psychological racism has implications for today. Informed by William Augustus Jones' *God in the Ghetto*, Wright argues that theology determines anthropology. “If I see God as male, if I see God as white male ... then I see humans through that lens. My theological lens shapes my anthropological lens. And as a result, white males are superior; all others are inferior.”

²² Robert Hood. *Begrimed and Black*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press)

Racially coded cultural myths and traditions have established and maintained the basis of Western empires, so in order to liberate culture and society and renew moral communities, we need to “... root out any teaching of superiority, inferiority, hatred or prejudice” and transform our educational system.

Wright argues that we must risk upsetting and transforming our conventional education system in order to create the new world and community. This involves combating the systematic mis-education about black religious and intellectual traditions by developing a multicultural educational system with an Afrocentric vision. Wright references Asa Hilliard and the “infusion curriculum”— a curriculum designed to infuse African and African American content into the public school curriculum. Afrocentric interpretations, from Wright’s perspective, are part of a larger multicultural and pluralistic understanding of the American story. Wright argues that from grammar school to adulthood, we must transform the way schools impose a Eurocentric perspective that denies the value of other human groups. The American story must be learned from a pluralistic perspective.

When blacks learn a loving knowledge of their history and culture, they become conscientized to reinsert themselves in history and reshape their communities. Blacks learn to see themselves differently and change the way they relate to each other.

The way black men treat black women. The way black parents treat black children. The way black youth treat black elders and the way black elders treat black youth. We are committed to changing the way we treat each other... The way they have and have mores treat the have nots. The way the educated treat the

uneducated. The way those with degrees treat those who never made it through high school.²³

This new way of relating transforms black life from chaos to community. Wright's vision of community does not end with positive relations in the black community. It extends beyond the black community and includes a broader vision of the common good. The concept of the common good is also deep within African tradition. "It takes a village to raise a child." "I am because we are, and because we are, I am." Desmond Tutu's concept of ubuntu: "My humanity belongs to you and your humanity belongs to me." These values serve as counterpoints to imperial creeds that conceive of life as defined by domination, competition and violence. The biblical concept for Wright's vision is called *oikoumene* or "household." Wright believes that humans are members of the same household but we are not all treated as members of the same family. To become family, according to Wright, we must be risk solidarity with "the least of these" and be committed to changing the way we see others who are different.

The struggle for a new community begins with solidarity with the struggling poor. Wright explains, "The prophetic tradition of the black church has its roots in Isaiah, the 61st chapter, where God says the prophet is to preach the gospel to the poor and to set at liberty those who are held captive. Liberating the captives also liberates who are holding them captive. It frees the captives and it frees the captors. It frees the oppressed and it frees the oppressors."²⁴

²³ <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/04/28/wright.transcript/>

²⁴ Transcript of Reverend Wright at National Press Club (<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/28/us/politics/28text-wright.html>).

The liberation of the poor is expressed through prophetic critique as we have already seen. Wright's sermons consistently critique dominant narratives from the perspective of the oppressed. He also expresses solidarity through service projects. Wright's ministry does not assuage middle class anxieties, it enters into solidarity with the poor by "building two senior citizen housing complexes and running two child care programs for the poor, the unemployed, the low-income parents on the south side of Chicago ... " feeding "over 5,000 homeless and needy families every year, while our government cuts food stamps and spends billions fighting in an unjust war in Iraq ..." and having a "prison ministry for 30 years, a drug and alcohol recovery ministry for 20 years, a full service program for senior citizens, and 22 different ministries for the youth of our church, from pre-school through high school..."²⁵

Wright also challenges us to risk convention and transform the way people see and relate to difference.

In the past, we were taught to see others who are different as being deficient. We established arbitrary norms and then determined that anybody not like us was abnormal. But a change is coming because we no longer see others who are different as being deficient.²⁶

Understanding the positive value of difference is at the heart of Wright's vision of how we become agents of a just and diverse community that reflects God's intent. "Being different does not mean one is deficient. It simply means one is different, like snowflakes, like the diversity that

²⁵ See Bill Moyers Journal, April 25, 2008 (<http://www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/04252008/transcript1.html>).

²⁶ Transcript of Wright's Speech to the NAACP, Monday April 28, 2008 (<http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/04/28/wright.transcript/>).

God loves.” Wright argues that we should conceive of difference without hierarchy. “Black music is different from European and European music. It is not deficient. It is just different. Black worship is different from European and European-American worship. It is not deficient. It is just different. Black preaching is different from European and European- American preaching. It is not deficient. It is just different.”²⁷

Once we’ve transformed the way we conceive difference, we must be committed to the costly task of reconciliation. Wright cites the Paul, “Be ye reconciled one to another, even as God was in Christ reconciling the world to God’s self.” God does not desire for us, as children of God, to be at war with each other, to see each other as superior or inferior, to hate each other, abuse each other, misuse each other, define each other, or put each other down. God wants us reconciled, one to another.” However, Wright cautions, blacks should not have to conform to white standards in order to be regarded as full-fledged members of our country. “Reconciliation does not mean that blacks become whites or whites become blacks or Hispanics become Asian or that Asians become Europeans.” “ Reconciliation is not sameness, it’s a respect for our individual difference.” Wright struggles for a multi-racial America that undermines conformity and fosters quality relationships. This entails “Embracing our own histories. Embracing our own cultures. Embracing our own languages as we embrace others who are also made in the image of God.”²⁸

In contrast to his sermonic statements, Wright’s public addresses went over without much controversy until the Question and Answer period at the National Press Club. In an overzealous attempt to explain black suffering, Wright publicly entertained theories that the government

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

invented HIV as a means of getting rid of black people and called Louis Farrakhan the E.F. Hutton of the black community (when Farrakhan talks, Wright claims, people listen, they may not always agree but they listen.) Out of electoral necessity, candidate Obama was forced to go from distancing himself from Wright to divorcing Wright and his former church, Trinity United Church of Christ.

There is no credible evidence for Wright's claims about HIV, however his suspicions were not ungrounded. There is strong evidence that the government has historically conducted medical experiments and outright abuse against black people. Of the two texts Wright cites, Leonard Horowitz's *Emerging Virus' AIDS and Ebola* by Tetrahedron Press is likely to be dismissed as conspiratorial. Horowitz argues that virus are man-made diseases and during the past decade, at least six internationally known authorities advanced theories that the AIDS virus (HIV) was developed by biological weapons researchers and either accidentally or intentionally transmitted with the help of the United States Public Health Service (USPHS) and the World Health Organization (WHO). However, Harriet Washington's *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans From Colonial Times to the Present* by Doubleday is a solid academic text, winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award For Non-Fiction. Washington writes the first and only comprehensive history of medical experimentation on African Americans. She begins with the earliest encounters between black Americans and Western medical researchers and tracks the racist pseudoscience and that resulted. She gives a detailed account of the ways both slaves and freedmen were used in hospitals for experiments conducted without their knowledge—a tradition, Washington argues, that continues today within

some black populations. Washington devotes 528 pages to this study with forty-two pages of scholarly notes and a twenty page bibliography. She highlights the infamous Tuskegee experiments (1932-1972) where black men were given placebos so government researchers could study how syphilis spreads and kills. Wright references Washington's and Horowitz' work not because he's crazy or desires to promote paranoia but to exercise a hermeneutic of suspicion against the government (and especially the Bush administration) within the black community.

Wright's championing of unpopular religious, political and ideological perspectives was so offensive to mainstream sensibilities that it seemed to discredit his message and ministry. He became politically radioactive, toxic to Obama and black politicians with electoral ambitions. But few have noticed that the political excommunication, reprimanding and death threats against Jeremiah Wright parallels the censure, silencing and martyrdom of liberationist theologians, thinkers and activists. Noted theologians such as Leonardo Boff, Jon Sobrino, Tissa Balasuriya, and Sebastian Kappen were censured or excommunicated from religious communities because of their academic writings. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as well as other ethnic studies texts and programs were banned in Arizona and evangelical conservatives on the Texas school boards are busy rewriting America's history of slavery and civil rights. Wright's invoking of dangerous memories that call America to account caused a media lynching that reminiscent of the lynching of black men.²⁹ This metaphor can be easily extended to state that the socio-political

²⁹See Obery Hendricks, "A More Perfect (High-Tech) Lynching: Obama, the Press, and Jeremiah Wright," in *The Speech: Race and Barack Obama's "A More Perfect Union,"* ed. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009.)

martyrdom of Wright parallels the real martyrdoms of Bonheoffer, King, Romero, Dorothy Stang, the six Jesuit priests in El Salvador, and Engleberg Mveng. Each experienced death in their struggle to upset the powers on behalf of the poor. Their deaths gave new meaning and vitality to the life of faith.

Conclusion

Wright's example during the 2008 presidential campaign dramatizes the difficulty of calling a nation to repentance over issues of race and violence. Public language and personal temperament notwithstanding, prophetic criticizing the dominant narratives of Empire from the perspective of the underside and prophetic energizing for a new community through the tasks of liberation, transformation and reconciliation is dangerous. It upsets the settled wisdoms of the day and challenges America's self image. Twenty-first century black theologians and liberationist must not only muster the strength to indict America for her appetite for racism and violence but also must have the courage to express the meaning of God's love for justice in a world that shows cultural and systematic disregard for the poor. These prophetic stances are costly; they are cross-bearing activities that may cost us our comfort and prestige so that we may fulfill the dictates of our faith by bringing new life into the world.