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Religious Nationalism and the Coronavirus Pandemic: Soul Sucking Evangelicals Make America Sick Again

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Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

William Butler Yeats (1921)

Abstract

This article investigates the response to the coronavirus crisis by evangelical Christian nationalists in the United States. The article outlines the curious mediaverse of religious nationalism – its post-truth and fake-news aspects in particular – links religious nationalism to American exceptionalism, and analyses conflicts between secular and religious authorities. Drawing upon some lessons from the past, the article addresses the wider implications of Christian nationalism on American politics, and capitalist ideology, as it has been played out virally in the corporate media. The article shows that the ideological underpinnings of evangelical Christianity prevent its proponents from understanding the virus in an historical and materialist manner, and points towards more epistemically sound approaches to relationships between science and religion. It concludes that privatization, austerity capitalism, and ‘gig economy’ need to be replaced by socialist alternatives, and seeks inspiration in theory and practice of Marxism and South American liberation theology.

Keywords: viral media, religious nationalism, Christian fundamentalism, evangelical Christianity, Alt-Right, Liberation theology, Marxism, postdigital

Apoplectic Apocalypticism: Religious Nationalism as Virus

Recently, journalist Amanda Marcotte (2020) shared a disturbing story: ‘a train engineer named Eduardo Moreno, apparently with great deliberation, derailed the freight train he was manning in Southern California, nearly killing occupants of three nearby cars. His target? The USNS Mercy, a Navy medical ship that’s been assisting nearby hospitals with COVID-19 patients.’ The rationale given by the train engineer is enough to cause even the most reserved introvert to spit fire. Marcotte elaborates: ‘Apparently, Moreno believes in a conspiracy theory that the coronavirus crisis is a hoax being deployed to cover for a shadowy takeover of the government.’

Marcotte’s reporting identifies one type of insanity—that which has infected the Trumpster conspiracy theorists and those who enable them, including (the previously) anti-vaccination crusader, President Donald Trump. But there is another type of insanity, the one that attempts to separate the rich and the poor, and then pretends that such a separation does not exist. Trump and the conspiracy theorists belong in this camp, too. The whistle-a-happy-tune- happy-talk-keep

talkin'-happy-talk cover up that paints the gross economic inequalities that mark disaster capitalism to be as normal as a spring day with chirping birds has been rent asunder by the coronavirus. Amidst the ideological debris being flung about—from both the right and the left—in the daily online philippics against the deep state, what isn't being engaged nearly enough—i.e., what needs a wider and more critical expansion of understanding—is the effect that the coronavirus is having on the powerless and the poor throughout the capitalist world. Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research warns:

Madness engulfs the planet. Hundreds of millions of people are in lockdown in their homes, millions of people who work in essential jobs – or who cannot afford to stay home without state assistance – continue to go to work, thousands of people lie in intensive-care beds taken care of by tens of thousands of medical professionals and caregivers who face shortages of equipment and time. Narrow sections of the human population – the billionaires – believe that they can isolate themselves in their enclaves, but the virus knows no borders. (Tricontinental 2020)

It is clearly recognizable for anyone with the most pedestrian discernment that the poor and powerless in our social order have never been given much consideration by the ruling class politicians and bureaucrats who are supposed to be looking out for the welfare of the collective citizenry.

When it comes to the current coronavirus pandemic, Italian author Francesca Melandri writes: 'Class will make all the difference. Being locked up in a house with a pretty garden is not the same as living in an overcrowded housing project. Nor is being able to work from home or seeing your job disappear.' (in Tricontinental 2020). In this world held captive by CoronaShock, the working class, the daily wage workers and migrant workers from around the globe who manage to survive being killed by the coronavirus, face the horror of not being able to provide food and shelter for their families—assuming that they already have a place to shelter themselves and their loved ones. Some of those who survive will likely end up on the assembly lines of high-tech security companies making IP (Internet protocol) cameras—Bosch Security Systems, Canon, Arecont Vision, Avigilon—that will help to monitor them once the coronavirus pandemic is curtailed and life goes on. But it won't be life as usual. It will be life in an updated, refurbished postdigital panopticon (Jandrić et al. 2018, Peters 2020). During the pandemic, Devega (2020) predicts that 'many people will embrace being monitored and tracked. The ability of an authoritarian regime to co-opt that technology — some of which is already in use by Google, for example — is very frightening.'

And in this toxic mix of circumstances—where we are saddled with a president who has claimed that a final US coronavirus death toll of approximately 100,000 to 200,000 people would indicate that his administration has 'done a very good job' (Rupar 2020)—the evangelical community is putting countless numbers of people at risk by refusing to stop holding large church gatherings, and refusing to cease its decades long attack on science. In the United States the evangelical community has found a second-tier messiah in the person of Donald Trump (McLaren and Jandrić 2020a). Christian nationalism in the age of Trump is a religious virus that gives no respite to its host—the commonweal and its enduring search for spiritual and material prosperity. But Trump is no fool when it comes to pleasing his base—he had been cannily throwing them red meat long before his run for president. And as president he is well on the way to defunding Planned Parenthood and, in the mind of many evangelicals, to bringing about the biblical apocalypse.

Approximately 40 percent of American adults are biblical apocalypticists and believe that Jesus will, or likely will, return to earth by 2050 (Dias 2020). From the time that the coronavirus crisis first appeared on the shores of God's favorite piece of real estate, it made it clear that it is comorbid with Christian nationalism; or to put it another way, Christian nationalism seems to be a co-occurring condition relative to pandemics that reach the shores of America the Beautiful (McLaren and Jandrić 2020a). Some religious scholars, in fact, are in agreement that there is a two-way relationship between religion and nationalism, a mutual reification and buttressing. As Grzymala-Busse (2019) explains,

[i]n this relationship, religiosity defines the nation—and nationalism reinforces religiosity, leading to unusually high rates of national identification with a given religion and high rates of religiosity itself. This mutual reinforcement characterizes countries where religious participation and religious nationalism are both high, such as the Philippines, Poland, Ireland until the late 1990s, or the United States. (Grzymala-Busse 2019)

And while this is certainly true, we cannot blur the distinction between the sacred dimension of religion and profane sphere of the political nation, which remain separate even when they contradict and/or reinforce each other.

I would not want to make the case that Christianity is equivalent to the political state in whose wheelhouse Trump sits in Washington (when he is not playing golf at Mar-a-Lago). But it is increasingly clear that Trump has identified himself with charismatic, Pentecostal and evangelical Christianity, largely for political reasons—they perceive him as a divine instrument of God and are prevalent in key states important for Trump's reelection chances. I am largely against religious states in principle, and have said so when speaking in Israel, or Pakistan, or the West Bank (Palestine). I have always supported freedom of religion within a secular state apparatus open to a wide range of religious faiths. And I have always defended 'the separation of church and state' (Thomas Jefferson's phrase) in articulating my understanding of the intent and function of the Establishment Clause and Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution which reads: 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...' (see McLaren and Jandrić 2020b) Despite what it says in the Constitution, the virus of Christian nationalism boasts no need of critical sobriety and less need for metropolitan intellectuals with their incessant insistence on finding new ways to clamp down on what they see as the necessary separation of church and state. Christian nationalism is a sickness that poisons every reservoir of hope and possibility with a fatal hubris. For decades, the messages of prosperity preachers have hollowed into my mind, sometimes in the form of a revolving worm announced by a roll of thundering apocalyptic prose and on other occasions like a flaming corpse decamped from the grave of undiscovered history. And in my most paranoid moments they take the shape of unclean spirits shooting like roman candles from some pungent, weed strewn sepulcher right out of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

On the surface Christian nationalism may seem about as dangerous as the skeletons that spring from the crypt at Spook-a-Rama, courtesy of Deno's Wonder Wheel Amusement Park on Coney Island. But that would be a serious miscalculation. What cannot be denied is that Christian nationalism in the age of Trump and his disaster capitalism cabinet stalks the halls of the White House and the nation's airwaves like Marx and Engels' hobgoblin rudely awakened from the depths of oblivion. Former evangelical Frank Schaeffer states: 'We're at a time now when the naked lickspittle enablement of Donald Trump by his evangelical followers is more horrifying than

ever...’ (Schaeffer in Boggioni 2020a). He goes on to say: ‘When we come to this time of COVID-19 overtaking our country, a literal life and death issue, we see two things very clearly.... One is the utter moral bankruptcy of this leader who pits himself against governors trying to save their people, and the second is the utter moral bankruptcy of evangelical, the white evangelical voter’ (Schaeffer in Boggioni 2020a).

After being placed in charge of the coronavirus crisis, the first action undertaken by Mike Pence was to form a prayer circle with evangelical supporters. Later, the state of Oklahoma held a state-wide prayer day where megachurch pastors from all over the state appeared with Gov. Kevin Stitt (R-OK) to try and pray-away the coronavirus. And, of course, prayer circles popped up all over the country. That wouldn’t be so bad if these titans of Christian power weren’t part of a long tradition that was infamously anti-science. Rational and religious minded citizens as well as atheists (and I count myself as among the former group) have no immunity to this type of siege, to this type of Hobbesian war of all against all; we have no Maid of Orléans armor of God that can protect us from the battlefield tactics of idolatrous Trumplar Knights, from this inescapably salty theology creeping up our spine like a winter chill at a Nova Scotian fishing village, from this widespread winnowing of reason, this twitterverse phrasemongering pitched from a Mar-a-Lago golf course caddy shack. The Trump cult who operate like impassioned yet enigmatic, love functionaries for Jesus and the 45th president regularly hands over our future to corporations (which Chomsky refers to as ‘private tyrannies’) (in Falcone 2015), a measure tantamount to having a spiritual death wish that will surely lead to self-destructive turmoil, if not a fate more harrowing than even end times prophets can wrench from the moribund secrets hidden within ancient scrolls discovered on episodes of *The Naked Archeologist*.

The curious mediaverse of religious nationalism

The Trump cult places in counterpoint the endless sweep of falsehoods about the coronavirus and the turbid, unyielding faith of those who propagate such falsehoods (see Peters, Jandrić and McLaren 2020a and 2020b). While we lack at present ‘a set of evidentiary standards for establishing the empirical existence of religious nationalism that goes beyond the invocation of religious motifs and symbols in politics’ (Grzymala-Busse 2019), it seems reasonable to assert that religious nationalism is alive and well among Trump’s evangelical Christian base—and it’s not pretty. According to Anna Grzymala-Busse (2019), religious nationalism, especially in the Christian world, ‘has shaped the very definition of legitimate citizenship, delineating the nation and privileging some political actors and visions in making public policy, obtaining electoral support, and building states.’

Religion, as it relates to ‘behavior, belief, and belonging’ is extremely ramped up among evangelicals, in terms of ‘attending religious services, evangelizing, and taking part in communal religious activities such as Bible study or prayer.’ According to Grzymala-Busse (2019),

Belief is an internalized and personal adherence to the doctrine and to the sacred: the personal level and kind of faith, acceptance of doctrine, and relationship to the deity, the sacred, and religious teachings. Belonging, or affiliation, is a much weaker connection: it may simply consist of self-identification or a nominal belonging to a given religion.

Grzymala-Busse (2019) elaborates that ‘where nationalism seeks political recognition and sovereignty for the nation, religious nationalism does so for a nation first and foremost defined by religion’. She also points out correctly that ‘referents of religion are the sacred and the

transcendental: nations are fundamentally mundane and political’. And I fully agree with the observation that ‘[w]hether religion and nation replace, reconcile with, or reinforce each other, they are conceptually and empirically distinct.’

Additionally, I would argue that intense activities such as Bible study, prayer, proselytizing, participating in religious pilgrimages and peregrinations, contributing to religious publications, and attending religious performances can create the contextually specific conditions of possibility for religion nationalism once the tribal conditions in American politics are met for the creation of a patriotic Protestant temperament. And once Trump was elected, reshuffled the government, and began to communicate through Twitter, the tribal conditions were set in place. Twitter for Trump is equivalent to the microphone at the lectionary of a church. From here he can dictate the catechism for the day’s events. The compatibility and mutual buttressing between the secular state and the evangelical community redounds to the Trump administration, solidifying his Christian base while accentuating the chasm between the illegitimate state and the ‘true’ religious calling of the country to bring freedom to all nations of the world, whether this includes imposing sanctions or bombing those countries back to the Stone Age.

The Hebraic idea of a people enjoying a special covenant with God has had an impact on Northern Irish, Afrikaaner and Israeli nationalism—and also on US nationalism (Grzymala-Busse 2019). The narratives of nations as divinely ‘chosen people’ have merged religious and national identities in these countries and I would say that Trump’s moving of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem certainly has secured the gratitude of many Israelis and Christians who believe that this action brings the world one step closer to Armageddon and the coming of the Messiah—for Christians this would mean that Jesus would establish the Kingdom of God on earth and ‘true’ Christians who had repented their sins would receive heaven as their reward. The pandemic for some is seen as a ‘divine reset.’ Get ready! The locusts having been swarming in East Africa, wildfires have ravaged Australia, and the golden trumpet was shaken free from angel Moroni’s hand on top of the Salt Lake Temple during a recent earthquake (Dias 2020). While it might be that those totemic entities know as sports have displaced religion as the chief factor in human group relationships in the US, religion is still going strong. Just witness how many Americans today believe in angels. Some reports say 8 in 10 (CBS News 2011).

Alt-right ethno-nationalist movements are identifying with Nordic symbology (just look at the symbols on Alt-right shields during their confrontations with Antifa). Are they seeking historical continuity with the inhabitants of Ragnarok? Are they seeking The Twilight of the Gods, where Odin and the Fenrir wolf will fight each other to the death? And where Loki will go against the Aesir, and fight Heimdall to the death. Will Tyr and the watchdog Garm that guards the gates of Hel kill each other? Stay tuned for a new season of The Coronavirus Dating Game, where participants will compete to find couples who are still alive in New York City. Clearly, as Grzymala-Busse (2019) puts it, ‘[r]eligious nationalism thus reinforces popular religiosity—and that religiosity becomes a marker of who belongs to the nation and who is a “true” member of the national community.’ This statement could not be more apposite than in the US today given the anti-Muslim policies of Trump, and the hostility towards migrants, immigrants and those seeking refugee status as a result of experiencing persecution in their own countries.

And of course, there are other attitudes that accompany religious nationalism that are associated with cultural homogeneity and the preservation of national traditions. These include ‘natalism, redistribution to members of the religious nation, the preservation of national religious symbols and traditions’ (Grzymala-Busse 2019). In contrast, religious nationalism ‘holds little affinity for increased diversity or change in national composition’ (Grzymala-Busse 2019).

Religious nationalism thus correlates with ‘high levels of hostility toward immigrants and other new groups that dilute the existing national identity (Grzymala-Busse 2019). And, of course, there is an antipathy towards stem cell research, abortion rights, same-sex marriage, divorce and other issues that are related to public policy.

Conflicts between secular and religious authorities reinforce old borders as well as breed new borders, and borders are prone to propagating violence. Give me a border and I will show you an enemy! Some evangelical Christians who argue that Christianity is under attack in the United States have motivated Christian militias to prepare for a holy war against the deep state. Religion and nation, God-talk and nation-talk, those contentious and toxic analogues, tend over time to genuflect towards conflict—if not outright violence. That is the nature of this virus. Is it any wonder that the NRx movement refers to Trump as the ‘God-Emperor’ who has the power and will to ‘restore order to an immigrant-flooded nation under the thumb of a progressive media-academic complex — “global Jewry,” in neo-Nazi-speak’ (O’Brien 2020). O’Brien writes that

[t]he neoreactionary movement, also known as ‘NRx’ or ‘Dark Enlightenment,’ is a geeky subset of the racist, misogynistic far-right that has festered in Silicon Valley’s libertarian circles for over a decade, especially within the cryptocurrency community. Its members revere [Peter] Thiel, microdose LSD and gussy up totalitarian ideas with a pseudo-intellectualism that creates a moral pretext for them to undermine — ‘engineer,’ they might say — democracy. (O’Brien 2020)

Surrounded by Madness: Are You Freaking Kidding Me?

And to say that Christian nationalism (I would link this to the prosperity gospel ideology which is deeply imbricated in the logic of capitalism, that is, the ruling ideas which Marx argued are inextricably braided to the ideas of the ruling class) is plague-infested would be an insult to the power of the plague. If the prosperity preachers are wincing from criticisms by fellow evangelicals, they certainly know how to hide it as they continue to double down on their convictions. Their embrace of Trump—who before his presidency rarely ventured into spiritually loaded territory—has been widely documented and commentaries that have offloaded scathing criticism are not difficult to find. The evangelical community continues to preen itself as the spokesperson for the correct trajectory of today’s political Christianity and in doing so has proclaimed Donald Trump as the new Christian messiah (McLaren and Jandrić 2020a). We’ve all seen their performances on television or in person—the flair, the fanfare, the bargain basement pageantry, the carnivalesque world of sensations. Have you ever seen a video of Paula White speaking in tongues? Just watch some old reruns of Robert Tilton’s show, *Success-N-Life*, and you might see where she got some of her tongue-twisting blubbing. (Personally, I prefer Tilton’s haut couture *glossolalia*, he’s the Donald Trump of charismatic prayer language, the king of sanctifying gibberish—apologies to Pat Boone). Mahte Ke Sodoebo! Koda Basanda Andanda de Bosoto! BeeSee DeeEeTee Labo! Hey there Bobby Lee, and howdy Jimbo, have you tried Jim Bakker’s ‘Silver Sol Liquid’ that he says can diagnose or cure coronavirus illness, you know, Covid-19. It’s been effective against SARS and HIV. Wiped them right out!

Yes, this type of religion tainted ideological muck is suffused all around us: A Chuck E. Cheese attempt at creating a rarified air of sanctity, a pantheon of kitsch religious props, an obsessive overlighting of the preacher on center stage clog dancing to the delicate harmony of a Cheyenne Frontier Days tie-down rodeo act. The whacky outpourings of the preacher, declaimed before a wildly effusive live audience, is often compelling in its allusive religiosity and emotional

spirituality — Thank you Jesus! Praise God! — yet devastating in its theological barrenness—pushing scripture beyond its semantic and semiotic limits. Betty, put down that textbook on evolution! I’ve been telling you since you were in kindergarten that human beings co-existed with dinosaurs and maybe even tamed some of the smaller ones and kept them as pets. Didn’t you watch the Flintstones when you were growing up? No—you were too busy watching that communist Mr. Rogers! A splashy aestheticism stands in for what we might hope to be the sepulchral depths of an impassioned religious celebration. Preaching while enthralled with the sensation of being enthralled—it all boils down to this.

We might profitably entertain this preponderance of delusion by asking the following questions: Could this spectacle be traced to the Hebraic idea of the covenant which is revealed in the narratives of nations as divinely ‘chosen people’? Could it be tied historically to the advent of ‘confessionalization’ or the Protestant Reformation (see Grzymala-Busse 2019)? Could this type of spectacle be a twentieth century remnant of biblical literalism or the detritus of an arch monasticism so spiritually claustrophobic that it finally led to a mass exodus to the cities? Could religious hysteria have slowly trickled down through the ages, only to be rekindled in big tent revivalism and the eventual appearance of the praise-be-to-God-amening-hallelujahing Grahams, Falwells, Robertsons, Swaggarts, Whites, Tiltens, Bakkers and others of this grandstanding, self-serving ilk? Could it be that God is having a Kayleigh McEnany-type meltdown? Or can the spectacle be traced to something more recent? A sloppy metaphysics spun from the lecture halls of Liberty University perhaps? An overweening estimation of the power of suggestion? An increased gray matter volume in the anterior cingulate cortex that can be correlated with inclinations towards social justice, Christian morality, Aristotelian ethics and liberation theology as opposed to those with increased gray matter volume in the amygdala (which is part of the limbic system concerned with emotions) that could be associated with alt-right adjacent evangelical Christianity and political conservatism? Could it be the rise of radio shock jocks such as Rush Limbaugh, whom President Trump honored with the Presidential Medal of Freedom?

Some Lessons of History

Indeed, the pathological logic and demonic invective of rightwing broadcasters like Rush Limbaugh could be a contributing factor to the madness that surrounds us (see McLaren and Jandrić 2020b). (Don’t you feel Falwell must be one of Limbaugh’s dittoheads? Can’t you just picture Jerry Falwell Jr. in Miami, his scarf billowing in the night air as he drives his convertible into the parking lot of his favorite dance club, listening to Rush on the radio?) Or, simply put, is the lock-step attachment of evangelicals to Trump more of a case of just plain hypocrisy on the part of the contemporary evangelical leadership? Surely there is much more to the story. And there is. Benjamin E. Park (2018) writes that during times of national or international crisis, the power of religious rhetoric is a force that can always be counted on historically to focus on and reinvigorate the idea of American nationalism. And in recent years its singular purpose has been to connect Christianity with the Republican Party, which can be seen in the Moral Majority’s ascension to the national stage in the 1980s and its connection to Ronald Reagan and the Republican Party (Park 2018).

But we can see explicit religiosity and conservatism reaching back even earlier to the framers of America’s federal government who ‘sought a distinction between denominational influence and state power—so much so that evangelical observers critiqued the Constitution as a “godless document”—partisans quickly capitalized on the power of religious rhetoric in political debates’ (Park, 2018). In the Age of Revolutions, which included both the French Revolution and

the American Revolution, key figures turned to Biblical figures for inspiration. According to Park (2018), French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for instance, ‘looked to Moses as the premier example for turning a “national body” into “a political Body” that lived together with stability and peace.’ In Germany, Friedrich Schlegel ‘argued for a symbiotic relationship between religion and politics’ (Park 2018).

The French Revolution caused American leaders to become concerned about the violence into which France descended, promoting ‘competing theologies of national belonging’ (Park 2018) and caused some politicians to rationalize French anarchy and violence as a result of a lack of religious devotion among its citizens. The French revolution influenced America’s concept of exceptionalism and placing Christianity at the center of the idea of patriotism (Park 2018). There was fear that the French Revolution was a threat to Christianity globally. And the influence of writers such as Thomas Paine became a concern of major significance since he was in favor of banishing religion from society and embracing secularism in its stead and embracing the Enlightenment commitment to universal rationalism as a challenge to religious authority and authoritarianism. Consequently, Park (2018) writes that ‘[i]n a world of growing secularism, the United States is presented as a last refuge for explicit Christian devotion.’ And in recent times, burgeoning religious nationalism has ‘even made possible one of the unlikeliest of alliances: the loyalty between evangelical ministers and Donald Trump’.

The Corona Prom King

The ideological hieroglyphics directing Trump’s thinking are not hard decipher, as Bob Cesca makes clear when he writes:

During a presidency that’s beyond satire, no one really anticipated that Trump’s Red Hat militia would end up being a death cult, but here we are. The cult’s warped calculus is basically this: Trump will only be re-elected with a prospering economy, but if COVID-19 decimates the economy, Trump could lose. So we have to save the economy, literally at any cost, even if it means we have to sacrifice older Americans (who typically vote Republican). (Cesca 2020)

Trump’s evangelical base seem to be adhering to their Master’s logic. And besides, Kathaleen Wall, a member of the Texas State Republican Executive Committee and a candidate for Texas’ 22nd Congressional District, is euphoric that the coronavirus has a silver lining: it’s going to save more people than it kills this week — because abortion clinics in the state of Texas have been closed (Chapman 2020a). I am certain most of Trump’s salvation corps would agree. The evangelical community—who are less likely to be seen wearing a protective mask while shopping at the local Piggly Wiggly than their scientifically minded atheist brethren—has received an upsurge of attention during the coronavirus crisis.

Journalist Catherine Stewart disagrees that Christian nationalism is equivalent to a religion, since she notes the positive things many evangelicals and other Christians are doing with respect to the coronavirus crisis. She prefers to view Christian nationalism as a political ideology ‘that cloaks itself in religious rhetoric’ and as a political movement ‘that put Trump in power’ (cited in Chapman 2020b). She writes: ‘the movement promotes an anti-science culture ... that has obviously contributed to our inability collectively to address this crisis in an evidence-based fashion. Misinformation is rife in those hyper-conservative and highly politicized religious communities that were all in for Trump.’ (Chapman 2020b).

Trump has boasted about his effectiveness in mobilizing the country against the coronavirus crisis but Amanda Terkel has shown the extent to which Trump downplayed the seriousness of the coronavirus when it first showed up in the US. This timeline is worth quoting in full:

On Feb. 10, he repeatedly predicted — at a meeting with governors, at a campaign rally and in a Fox Business interview — that the coronavirus would no longer be a problem by April. He then made this claim at least three more times a few days later.

‘Now, the virus that we’re talking about having to do — you know, a lot of people think that goes away in April with the heat — as the heat comes in. Typically, that will go away in April. We’re in great shape though. We have 12 cases — 11 cases, and many of them are in good shape now.’ [Feb. 10]

‘Looks like by April, you know, in theory, when it gets a little warmer, it miraculously goes away.’ [Feb. 10]

‘I really believe they are going to have it under control fairly soon. You know in April, supposedly, it dies with the hotter weather. And that’s a beautiful date to look forward to.’ [Feb. 10]

‘We think and we hope, based on all signs that the problem goes away in April.’ [Feb. 13]

‘There’s a theory that, in April, when it gets warm — historically, that has been able to kill the virus. So we don’t know yet; we’re not sure yet.’ [Feb. 14]

‘I think it’s going to work out fine. I think when we get into April, in the warmer weather, that has a very negative effect on that and that type of a virus.’ [Feb. 14]

On Feb. 10, there were 12 confirmed cases of COVID-19, the illness caused by the coronavirus, in the United States, according to Johns Hopkins University. Now there are nearly 200,000. And on Tuesday, the death toll in the U.S. surpassed 3,000, making the virus more deadly than the 9/11 terrorist attacks that reshaped much of American life. Who knows how many people will have died as the result of the coronavirus by the time this article sees print? (Terkel 2020)

Trump has referred to the Covid-19 as the ‘corona flu’, minimizing its potential to wreak lethal havoc on the US population. Geriatric populations especially are at major risk. Mike Davis (2020) reports that the death rate among those over 65 is 23% in Italy, and 18% in Britain. Because of the shortage or unavailability of test kits, containment in the US is virtually impossible and without testing it is difficult to ascertain the size of the infected population. Davis (2020) reminds us that ‘this virus is mutating as it courses through populations with different age compositions and acquired immunities.’ Davis (2020) also points out that ‘even if the virus remains stable and little mutated, its impact on under-65 age cohorts can differ radically in poor countries and amongst high poverty groups.’ Davis admonishes journalists and Western governments for egregiously ignoring the threat of the coronavirus to the global poor. He warns us that ‘[t]he only certainty is that rich countries and rich classes will focus on saving themselves to the exclusion of international solidarity and medical aid. Walls not vaccines: could there be a more evil template for the future?’

The US was woefully unprepared for previous flu seasons and its hospitals were unable to cope with those who became stricken as a result of ‘profit-driven cutbacks of in-patient capacity’ which resulted in a shortage of medical supplies and hospital bed availability. Davis notes (2020) that ‘ER conditions in such institutions are already unable to cope with seasonal infections, so how will they cope with an imminent overload of critical cases?’ Already ‘380,000 nursing home

patients die every year from facilities' neglect of basic infection control procedures'. Nursing homes are very likely to become 'coronavirus hotspots'. Davis (2020) underscores the unwillingness of Big Pharma to participate in the development of new antibiotics and antivirals, remarking that '[o]f the 18 largest pharmaceutical companies, 15 have totally abandoned the field'. They are more interested in producing profits by churning out tranquilizers, pain killers, and Viagra. Davis warns that '[a]s the antibiotic revolution is rolled back, old diseases will reappear alongside novel infections and hospitals will become charnel houses'.

Small Hands, Big Lies

The role of the 'big lie' in Germany's WWII persecution of the Jews is often attributed to Goebbels and the Nazis and was used to push long-standing anti-Semitism into the unholy precinct of torture, medical mutilation and mass executions. Jennifer Rubin (cited in Burris 2020a) condemns Fox News for spreading what amounts to the Big Lie with respect to appropriate ways of reacting to the coronavirus. She writes:

'In short, Fox News — its anchors, its contributors, its panelists and its guests (e.g., Republican elected officials) — have spread provably wrong information to its viewers on arguably the most important story in our lifetimes,' said Rubin. 'A large percentage of Americans who form the Trump cult and absorb his misleading information (It's like the flu! Plenty of tests!) get their misinformation reinforced by an outlet that seeks as its main goal to support the president.' (Rubin in Burris 2020a)

Clearly Trump is no 1950s Commando Cody type hero, when it comes to a national crisis. Commando Cody defended us from the Radar Men from the Moon. Trump can't make enough test kits available for the American public. In fact, he has clearly exacerbated the crisis by dint of his initial cavalier attitude toward it. And yet, even the medical experts have waffled on exactly how to fight the virus. At first they said that Americans don't need to wear masks, then they changed their minds. Kenen and Roubein (2020) report: 'The agency said the virus spread through "droplets" from coughs and sneezes — but then warned about catching it from people with no symptoms, or even from surfaces, like subway turnstiles or metal shopping carts. It said young people are at low risk — but the hospital beds and morgues of New York called that into question.' And while confusion has reigned supreme among the Trump administration, including its medical teams, what is very clear is that the country should be practicing social distancing and residents should remain in their homes unless they are part of essential services to the community.

Many Trump supporters, however, are flagrantly disregarding the advice of medical experts since they want to show their loyalty to Trump by downplaying the crisis. Hey, let's go to the beach today, honey, it's a nice sunny day! Thanks to the slavish veneration they afford their man-child master in his war against America, Trump's cult followers are more receptive to the idea that the coronavirus should be called the 'China virus.' Hey, let's make the virus the fault of China, to deflect blame away from Trump's ineptitude in handling the crisis! The alt-right and ethno-nationalist movements are going to be inundated with new applications for membership as a result of Trump's racist dog-whistle.

Charles Sykes (2020) reports that evangelical Jerry Falwell Jr.—who is as subtle about his adoration of Trump as the hair and moustache dye on MyPillow CEO Mike Lindell—has held in flagrant disregard the health of his students at his Liberty University, and, by extension, the health of all those with whom his students will come into physical contact. Falwell, who has maintained

that the coronavirus was a plot to hurt Trump and hinted that it could be a bioweapon created by North Korea or China to attack the US, has acted recklessly and irresponsibly. Despite the escalating coronavirus pandemic, several thousand students and professors returned to Liberty University's main campus while the rest of the nation's campuses were locked down:

Falwell, who is the president of the conservative Christian school, defending his decision by insisting that '99 percent of [students] are not at the age to be at risk and they don't have conditions that put them at risk.' That, of course, is factually untrue: young people are not immune. Indeed, last week the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said more than a third of U.S. patients ill enough to be hospitalized were ages 20 to 54. And of course, even young people who do not become seriously sick can pass the disease to others (Sykes 2020; see Palma 2020a).

S.V. Date (2020) reports that Trump has been trying to convince the American people that he has been a great wartime president who has done a miraculous job in protecting the country from the coronavirus: 'Having sold himself as a great business and military leader despite bankrupt casinos and bone spurs, President Donald Trump faces his greatest challenge yet: making Americans forget the two months he dismissed concerns about a deadly pandemic as a "hoax."' At the time of this writing, Trump's approval ratings are increasing, demonstrating yet again the American public have fallen victim to the swarmy cult of Trump. Trump's evangelical followers can continue to bask in his carnivorous glory.

An immediate challenge to be reckoned with is the idea that the coronavirus can be cured by prayer, or by being implored to touch the television screen by a preacher (very likely close to the commercial break). Sky Palma writes:

One of those people is evangelist Kenneth Copeland...who visited the White House in 2018 for a dinner Trump held with a group of evangelical leaders. Earlier this month, Copeland went viral for a segment he did on this Victory Network channel where he asked his viewers to put their hands on their TV screens in order to receive God's divine protection against the coronavirus. 'Put your hand on that television set,' Copeland said. 'Hallelujah. Thank you, Lord Jesus. He received your healing. Now say it: "I take it. I have it. It's mine. I thank you and praise you for it."' (Palma 2020b)

When the Catholic Church is searching for a miracle to prove sainthood, it is well understood that finding such proof can take years, even decades, of careful investigation, including scientific investigation. Do we really expect those desperate for a cure for, say, liver disease to find the Holy Spirit cascading through the neon, xenon and argon gases that have miraculously combined into the phosphor gas that makes up the cells of their flat screen television set? Or by making such a statement am I admitting to an egregious lack of faith? Will my television set suddenly turn on by itself, in the middle of the night, with an urgent message from John the Baptist that the Second Coming is now in progress?

Since it is unlikely that those pastors under sixty have ever frequented pavilions for pulmonary patients (my father died slowly and painfully of emphysema and hacking coughs and mounds of bloody mucous were a steady fixture of my childhood and adolescence), they may feel that they have been granted divine immunity by the Holy Spirit. Or, should they contract the disease and survive, they can then make the boastful claim that their daily baptism in the Word of

God protected them from a painful death. By calling for church services to continue, they willingly subject themselves and the hundreds or thousands who pack their churches to the virus, and this is true even if they hold their church services outdoors. Do pastors think outdoor winds don't carry Christian spittle? Even if that spittle is born again?

Rev. Tony Spell, who defied an order from Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards against large gatherings in the midst of the coronavirus outbreak, because the good Reverend Spell believes the handling of the coronavirus pandemic is 'politically motivated', was charged on six misdemeanor counts for his actions but, hallelujah, he is going to be advised in court by Alabama's infamous Judge Roy Moore (even though Moore is not licensed to practice law in Louisiana). Moore believes that charging Rev. Spell is a violation of the acknowledgment that God is sovereign in America (Gstalster 2020). And even though he has been charged, Reverend Spell is back at it again, intent on holding more services at his Life Tabernacle megachurch in Baton Rouge, with the justification that Jesus is a physician:

...people's hope is in the house of God...If they do contract the virus, if they have fears of the virus, the church is more essential now than ever to pray with people, to let them know there is a physician in Jesus Christ. He is the healer; come under you all that are weary and heavy-laden, let me give you rest. We were supposed to be at a million and a half body bags and we're at 4,800 so the narrative is false. (Spell in Boggioni 2020b)

Rev. Spell claims to believe the science surrounding Covid-19 but then argues, astonishingly, that because he heard that some people are infected with the virus and recover without even being aware they had the virus, that this somehow justifies his putting his parishioners (and those with whom they may come into contact) at serious risk. For the good Reverend, spiritual healing supersedes medical safety precautions. He also claims that his services are preventing incidents of domestic violence, suicide and starvation by holding his church services (Spell in Boggioni 2020b). In fact, Rev. Death Wish Let-Me-Be-Remembered-As-A-Martyr-Spell is advocating religious fanaticism, calling for Christians literally to die from the coronavirus in the name of religious freedom. He proclaimed that those who 'prefer tyranny over freedom do not deserve freedom'. He also said that 'The bible teaches us to be absent from our bodies so we can be present with the Lord. ... So like any revolutionary, or like any zealot, or like any pure religious person, death looks to them like a welcomed friend' (Palma 2020c). Does this sound to you a bit like a Christianized version of the 'Heaven's Gate' cult, whose leaders preached that suicide would allow them to exit their bodily "containers" in order to enter an alien spacecraft hidden behind the Hale-Bopp comet? A nightmare scenario: Aaron Bundy joins Rev. Spell in a Waco-like standoff.

Other megachurch pastors are intent on flouting social distancing guidelines during Palm Sunday and Easter. Kelly Burton, pastor at Lone Star Baptist Church in Lone Star, Texas, wrote: 'Satan's trying to keep us apart, he's trying to keep us from worshipping together. But we're not going to let him win' (in Barone 2020). Fundamentalist Christians, as a spiritual tribe, frequently rally around the idea that they are being persecuted. Remember how indignant Christian evangelicals felt about being 'persecuted' by the vile, evil, satanic greeting of 'happy holidays' because they felt it was an attack on 'Merry Christmas' and Christianity in general? Fox News played this 'persecution' to the hilt. Trump bragged to a conservative student group, Turning Point USA, that he had given the right to speak the words 'Merry Christmas' back to Americans after it was falsely claimed that the White House's 'National Christmas Tree' was renamed the 'holiday tree' under President Obama. Does anyone remember when, in 2003, France criticized the US plan

to invade Iraq and elected officials in the U.S. House of Representatives decided to rename French fries, “freedom fries”? Fortunately, I’m not ancient enough to recall when, during World War I, Sauerkraut was renamed ‘liberty cabbage’ and German measles became known as ‘liberty measles’.

If evangelical Christians want to understand religious persecution in a more serious vein, they can certainly find valid examples of the persecution of Christians—where those faithful to their beliefs have been exiled, or tortured, or burned alive at the stake. But the idea that Christians are being persecuted for having to hold their church services online—as most college professors have been required to do with teaching their classes during this pandemic—is stretching the notion of persecution to absurd proportions (McLaren 2020). But this Christian persecution complex does serve a purpose. Evangelical congregations can now identify as martyrs—with those Christians thrown to the lions in ancient Rome by emperor Nero. But, seriously, we are talking here about throwing Christians to their laptops so that they are forced to watch their pastors speak in tongues on their computer screens. How traumatizing is that? Have the faithful forgotten that you can now be healed by touching a tv screen while a church service is in progress? And I’m sure God wouldn’t discriminate against computer screens. Just ask evangelical preacher Kenneth Copeland. Haven’t these evangelicals heard of evangelism, cybertemples and churches, and online prayer chapels in networked environments that can be customized to any religious belief system? Yes, be wary of technology but don’t be too fearful that watching a church service in lieu of the real thing is the digital equivalent to being a loser. (Is there anything worse in Trumpworld than not winning?) The public release of the Apple iPhone was regarded as the ‘Jesus phone’ when it first came out in 2007. And then for those with more conservative inclinations, there is the flip-phone, sometimes called the ‘kosher phone’, that has no Internet to tempt the user into entering the world of sin—the original model being the LG VX5500, which was released in 2008.

Ammon Bundy of the Malheur Militia (who once led an armed takeover of a wildlife refuge in Oregon) has encouraged Idaho residents to defy the social distancing orders. At a public meeting he told the audience that the coronavirus is a ‘relatively low-risk situation’ and added that ‘if nine out of 10 people were dying, it still does not justify the taking of rights’ (Humphrey 2020). Bundy warned that he was willing to use weapons to ‘defend’ the rights of businesses to remain open during the pandemic (Humphrey 2020). And you can be sure that white supremacist militia members all over the country are all on board with this sentiment. Perhaps they frequent the same shooting ranges as their fellow evangelicals where they can share information on the best firearms to have during a pandemic. Hey you rookies, avoid the five-shot snub nose, J-frame, revolvers. They have heavier trigger pulls and a shorter sight radius and lack the accuracy of revolvers with larger frames. Get your asses in gear on this, okay? Pandemic preppers arm up!

But of course, all of this drama around putting people at risk of the coronavirus is supposedly for the benefit of the younger generation, who will otherwise die (and according to Trump, many will die of suicide), should the economy collapse. Besides, it’s a chance to show that born again Christians are not wimps. Trump has now tacked to the left in so far as stressing the deadly seriousness of the virus, yet immediately afterwards tacks to the right again, by saying that we need to open the country up again for business (some people are questioning if Trump has business ties to the drug hydroxychloroquine or if he’s onto something that has escaped the attention of the medical establishment. After all, he’s a billionaire, and in his own words, a ‘stable genius’).

Perhaps Trump would be willing to attend a service at The River Church in Tampa where, as Burris (2020b) notes, Pastor Rodney Howard-Browne ‘has denounced... social distancing

claiming that he can cure the coronavirus just like he did with the Zika virus (which still exists)’. Howard-Browne ‘promised his flock that he would never close the church, regardless of what scientists and doctors say’ (Burris 2020b). Howard-Browne is insistent that he has a cure for the Covid-19:

We are not stopping anything. I’ve got news for you, this church will never close. The only time the church will close is when the Rapture is taking place.... We brought in 13 machines that basically kill every virus in the place, and uh, if somebody walks through the door it’s like, it kills everything on them. If they sneeze, it shoots it down at like 100 mph. It’ll neutralize it in split seconds. We have the most sterile building in, I don’t know, all of America. (Burris 2020b)

Amen! So let me ask this: If the evangelical leaders are so sure that their faith will protect them, will they volunteer to be the last ones to receive the vaccine when it is available?

A Mean-Spirited Metaphysics

If we learn one thing from this pandemic, it is that the US health care system, ripped to shreds by tax breaks for the rich, privatization, austerity capitalism and the rise of the ‘gig economy,’ needs to be replaced by socialized medicine. The whole country needs socialism—and if people can’t see this, then it just shows how powerful a hegemon the media industrial complex is, as it continues to create the ‘necessary illusions’ that so far have worked effectively in keeping the American from mounting a popular ground-level challenge to the overall capitalist system. Here the media serve as a self-replicating filibustering mechanism that keeps the public in a state of endless debate over whether or not there are viable alternatives to the current capitalist system, creating a pendulum of inertia at both ends of the argument. It appears that many Christian nationalists formulate the virus in a way that metaphysically juxtaposes nature to history, producing a Manichean duality of good versus evil, a social universe overpopulated by metaphysical reflections of a mystified world. They understand the virus not as historically determined by circumstances engendered in a world that is both real and law-governed—i.e., as in the chronic tendency of capitalism towards overproduction—and that can be explained dialectical analysis, but as trapped within a chamber pot history in which the laws of nature remain static, timeless and stagnant. In this way, the virus can be interpreted as an indication of God’s wrath against those who support abortion or who are homosexual and those in the Deep State who are working to undermine Trump and setting up pedophile rings in pizza joints.

An attachment to this type of paranoid ideology clearly is preventing evangelical Christians from understanding the virus in an historical and materialist manner—from the vantage point of a deep realism—and thus promoting relief from spiritual constipation. Does not the basis of the spiritual reside in the material—in flesh, blood and brain? I’m not taking a physicalist position here—since I think it is very likely that consciousness exists beyond the material and is mediated, that is, refracted (not reflected) in, along, and through the brain. What I am saying is that evangelicals appear in many cases to have adopted a creed of thought that antiseptically separates the general from the particular, the universal from the specific, and conceives of dichotomies (i.e. fact versus value) from an abstract and metaphysical perspective. But binary oppositions—let’s say male and female, black and white, up and down are not oppositions in a metaphysical or idealistic sense but in the real world of scarcity they exist as ‘distinctions’ trapped within dependent hierarchies. Capitalism constrains labor, whiteness constrains blackness, maleness

constrains femaleness, and so on—via capitalism’s institutionalized structures and their normalizing functions attached to racism, sexism, division of labor, judicial system, etc. We must wake up to the fact that we make ourselves (our self and social formation) in accordance with wider laws of nature. And in so doing we are dependent upon laws of necessity.

External nature imposes necessity upon human beings. But there is, after all, absolute necessity and contingent necessity. Necessity is absolute only in relation to the needs of society, which are historically specific. We live in a capitalist society and we necessarily have to sell our labor power for a wage unless we own the means of production. In other words, needs are contextually specific, they are contingent upon the situation at hand (i.e., mode of production, geopolitics, existential challenges). So that contingency and necessity have to be understood dialectically, not as ‘either/or’, but as ‘both/and’. All things are relative to the necessity that produces them. Yet evangelical preachers declaim messianically that humankind is universally born of the spirit and propagate the falsehood that contingent phenomena such as the coronavirus are in reality divine plagues cast upon humankind for the sin of homosexuality, abortion, fornication, political correctness, multiculturalism. In this way, for evangelicals, faith in the transcendent supernatural power of Jesus *must* supersede science. Humans are perceived as powerless if they decline to pray to the God of Prosperity. Here science is glibly supplanted by a metaphysical abstraction. But prayer should not be done in the spirit of helplessness. We cannot pray and then abdicate our responsibility for achieving what we are praying for. Because we are denying the difficult work ahead in saving the country from Covid-19.

Prayer can serve as a smokescreen that hides the class struggle and the socialist structures that are necessary to create a world prepared for disasters such as the coronavirus pandemic. I am not denigrating the power of prayer here since I endorse the following statements of the Galileo Commission:

1. No human intellectual activity, including science, can escape the fact that it has to make assumptions that cannot be proven using its own methodology (i.e. absolute presuppositions).
2. The prevalent underlying assumptions, or world model, of the majority of modern scientists are narrowly naturalist in metaphysics, materialist in ontology and reductionist-empiricist in methodology.
3. This results in the belief that consciousness is nothing but a consequence of complex arrangement of matter, or an emergent phenomenon of brain activity.
4. This belief is neither proven, nor warranted.
5. In fact, there are well documented empirical phenomena that contradict this belief. (Galileo Commission 2020)

This is not an argument against materialism; as a bona fide, Teslified, ecopedagogicalized social scientist I rely on materialist analysis, but I can affirm that there are reasons to move *beyond* materialist explanations for understanding and appreciating certain phenomena. This is not prophecy television gobbledygook speech. I remain committed to an historical materialist analysis of capitalism and still, at the same time, consider it possible that prayer may have some effects that cannot be explained by traditional paradigms of science (see McLaren and Jandrić 2020b). But during a pandemic, prayer should not be a substitute for medical research. And prayer circles cannot replace medical treatment. And religious bullshit cannot take the place of rational adjudication and dialectical reasoning.

Paula, Jerry, and Franklin, are you listening? You might want to order some books on liberation theology. Or join a Paulo Freire or Thomas Merton reading group. I'm sure they will encourage you to pull up a chair. Attend a Sunday service by Dr. William J. Barber, II, co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign. You can still accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior without at the same time blaming the filthy commies from waging a war against Christianity through their advocacy of multiculturalism, feminism, LGBTQ rights, bilingual education, democratic socialism. Well, the list goes on. Liberation theology advocates a preferential option for the poor and has stood beside peasant resistance movements in Latin America, even as US trained and sponsored death squads of the Salvadorean military and police forces assassinated many of their leaders, including six Jesuits, their housekeeper, and her daughter in 1979 in their residence on the campus of the Jesuit Central American University (UCA) in San Salvador, El Salvador. They also participated in the assassination of Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero, the 'voice of those without voice', who was gunned down saying mass at Hospital de la Divina Providencia, a Catholic hospital specializing in oncology and care for the terminally ill. Liberation theology has learned from the writings of Karl Marx without abandoning the teachings of Jesus, teachings which condemn differentiating wealth—the fact that some people are rich at the expense of others who are poor. You can learn, too. Check your local library. Better still, visit some base communities in America Latina.

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