

Theocracy Alert

Dominionist dementia: What's Jesus got to do with it?

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December 23, 2004—As we navigate the religious holiday season and attempt to psychologically and spiritually prepare ourselves for the “second” (or third or fourth or fifth) term of the current regime, I thought it might be appropriate to examine this fellow Jesus whom the Dominionists of the religious right claim to follow. In doing so, one will notice that the historical Jesus bears almost no resemblance to the Jesus of Dominionism.

For a thorough examination of the Dominionist ideology see [Kathleen Yurica's expose](#).

I write this not from a religious or sectarian perspective but because Jesus is one of my teachers; however, I am not a Christian, but then neither was he.

First, culturally speaking, Jesus' birth was shameful. His mother was an unmarried teenager. Apparently, the practice of abstinence did not serve her well. As the story goes, she was visited and impregnated by an angel, but try telling that to a culture of staunchly virtuous practitioners of Jewish law. Moreover, Jesus was born into poverty, and I will have much more to say about this later, but for now, we should notice that a crude stable birth was hardly equivalent to an upscale, unsullied modern hospital's finest obstetrics unit complete with around-the-clock private duty nurses. People like Mary and Joseph would have been comparable to “uninsured Medicaid patients” and most likely would have been perceived as a burden on the economy. After all, they were in Bethlehem in the first place because they were forced to travel there to pay a hefty tax which the top one percent of the empire may have escaped as a result of a generous “tax cut.”

So there you have it—Jesus, the “illegitimate” son of undesirables making his entrance into the world by way of a barn, attended by animal smells and sounds because that was the most his parents could afford. Not exactly the image the Pharisees or the “religious right” of Jesus' day had in mind for the birth of the Messiah.

Now of course, the Dominionists would not appreciate being equated with the Pharisees because Pharisees were “unbelievers” who had not been “born again.” However, even a superficial understanding of the Jewish religious leaders of Jesus' time reveals stunning similarities between first-century Pharisees and twenty-first century Dominionists. Empires have a way of distorting human connection with the sacred to such an extent that once-noble teachings lose their credibility and healing efficacy. Such was the world into which Jesus was born—a world in which religious leaders had ceased attending to the spiritual needs of their followers and had become instead, preoccupied with external behavior, as opposed to the intentions of the heart.

Hence, the taunting of Jesus by the Pharisees for “violating” Jewish law by healing on the Sabbath and associating with the fringe elements of his society.

Dominionist teaching is ostensibly based almost entirely on a literal interpretation of the Bible. To justify virtually every position, they argue that “the Bible says. . . .” I always enjoy encountering them face to face because when I hear “the Bible says,” I cheerfully reply, “And which bible would that be?”

By that I mean that throughout the history of the Christian church, endless writings in the Christian tradition were eliminated, for a plethora of reasons, from the final canon of what is now called holy scripture. The decisions regarding which writings to include or omit from the canon were largely based on politics and gender. Reading the so-called "spurious" or "heretical" writings eliminated from the canon is most revealing for the light they shed on beliefs which the church fathers and popes found intolerable and which did not fit neatly into the political ends of the ecclesiastical establishment.

Were Jesus with us today, he would be an enormous problem for the Dominionists, and we can be certain that he would be perceived by them not unlike a homeless street person or an antiwar protestor. Jesus and his followers would be marginalized, arrested, and imprisoned. Contrary to the Jesus contrived by the Dominionists, the historical Jesus did not perceive himself as a savior of anyone. Whereas today's fundamentalist Christian insists that one must accept Jesus as one's "personal savior," Jesus never taught this concept. Rather, he was a spiritual mystic and an activist on behalf of human rights and social justice.

Christian fundamentalism, a byproduct of Western industrialism and free market capitalism, offers a "product." Not unlike the promotion of term life insurance or membership in an exclusive club, it "sells" eternal salvation in heaven and a "guarantee" that all sins prior to being born again are forgiven and that one becomes privy to its "infallible" interpretation of the Bible and Christian doctrine. Thus, Dominionists assert that they possess the ultimate truths of the universe and on the basis of their "personal relationship with Christ," have every right to establish a Christian theocracy in the United States.

After all, those stuffy intellectual founding fathers were Deists who essentially believed that a Supreme Being had created the universe, walked away and left it to humankind to manage. The principles on which they founded the American republic need to be reworked, say the Dominionists, so that the United States can be a fundamentalist Christian theocracy ruled by the born-again elite. And, it is crucial to understand that if one is "born again," one is "in," and if one is not "born again," one will remain "out" until one has the born-again experience.

When I read the Gospels, I see a Jesus irreconcilable with the one portrayed by the Dominionists. That Jesus knows no "in" or "out" in terms of divine acceptance of human beings. Unequivocally, he taught his listeners to open their eyes to the total and incontrovertible forgiveness and acceptance that is already theirs and for which they need do nothing. This acceptance, he said, applied to everyone of every ethnicity, social class, gender, or sexual orientation. Moreover, he taught that as a result of one's inclusion in the "kingdom" or sacred realm, one should live one's life demonstrating gratitude for that inclusion by taking the message of it to all people, reassuring them of the preciousness of their lives in the eyes of the divine. To do so, he demonstrated, would give our lives meaning and fulfillment.

Above all, Jesus modeled and taught the virtues of compassion. For him, compassion was about relieving the misery of the poor and the marginalized, not in order to feel good about oneself or on behalf of one's reputation, but simply because that is one's primary purpose on earth. For Jesus, compassion was a verb, meaning that as he taught and lived it, it was not a concept or a noble idea, but a continuous action of bringing justice to the human condition. Fourteenth-century mystic, Meister Eckhart, wrote that "compassion" is the best name there is for the creator and that if we wish to live in harmony with the creator, we must live compassion.

Living the compassion Jesus taught would preclude the mean-spiritedness of the Dominionist who champions the so-called self-made man pulling himself up by the bootstraps, and Dominionism's vicious crusade to eliminate funding for services for children, the poor, the marginalized and all who cannot advocate for themselves. The compassion Jesus lived deplores the intentional bankrupting of public services so that individuals and corporations can wax fat and powerful from their privatization. Against this kind of abuse of the common good, Jesus railed vehemently.

Obviously, Jesus' compassion would hardly include going to war, let alone constructing a panoply of lies to justify doing so. While it is unlikely that Jesus would rejoice over the act of abortion, it is equally true

that the compassion of Jesus would compel him to be not merely “pro-birth” but genuinely pro-*life*—a distinction that Dominionists rarely make because they are not interested in the quality of life of unwanted or unplanned children. It is one thing to fawn over the “right to life” while seeking to recriminalize abortion, and it is quite another to refuse to criminalize institutionalized acts of death such as the military industrial complex, the napalming of innocent human beings in Iraq, and massive annihilation of the earth’s ecosystems. Can we really imagine the historical Jesus supporting Jerry Falwell’s proclamation to “blow away Islamic fundamentalists in the name of God”?

Moreover, it is highly likely that the historical Jesus was not the pale, white-skinned, ethereal, civilized-looking caricature of two thousand years of Christian artistic depictions, but rather an untidy, hairy, wild-looking desert-dweller who drank wine and danced at weddings. Increasingly, new historical evidence strongly suggests that he was in relationship with and married to Mary Magdalene. Two of the most reliable sources are *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, by Michael Baigent, Henry Lincoln, and Richard Leigh and *The Woman With The Alabaster Jar and The Goddess And The Gospels*, by Margaret Starbird. Written before the *Da Vinci Code*, these sources point to the birth of at least one child of Jesus and Mary and the reality that rarely was a devout Jewish man in the ancient world unmarried. In addition, Jesus was often addressed as “Rabbi,” and in his day, rabbis were almost always married.

Some evidence exists that one of Jesus’ disciples, John (“the disciple whom Jesus loved,” according to John’s gospel), was homosexual. Leonardo da Vinci, in his “Last Supper,” depicts John as laying his head on Jesus’ breast. We do not know of any specific homosexuals with whom Jesus was acquainted, but clearly, he was accused by the Pharisees of consorting with all manner of outcasts, and while homosexuality was rampant among Roman officials, it was anathema for Jewish men. In any event, the imprisonment and “reprogramming” of homosexuals, which some Dominionists have suggested, is not a policy that the Jesus of the Christian gospels would approve.

Contrary to Dominionist designs, Jesus would not promote the establishment of a theocracy. He was born into an empire and spoke unambiguously against it. Railing against abuses of religion, he brashly threw the religious elite out of the temple because they were charging the poor for worshipping there. Constantly throwing the plight of the poor in the faces of the exploitative Pharisees, he blatantly argued that in God’s eyes, the poor were more valued than the rich—a spectacular inversion of Dominionist ideology which like the dogma of seventeenth-century American Puritanism holds that wealth is an indication of God’s blessing.

Knowledge of the historical Jesus illuminates the appalling chasm between what he lived and taught and Dominionist ideology. Empire, a perpetual war on terror, the “reworking” of the U.S. Constitution, the destruction of civil liberties, the privatization of public services, the devastation of the environment, the looting of the U.S. Treasury, the recriminalization of abortion, the persecution of gay and lesbian human beings—what’s Jesus got to do with it? Absolutely nothing. To those who advance these atrocities, he would only reply: “I never knew you.”