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THE DARE OF DEMOCRACY: FEAR, FAITH AND FREEDOM

This Address was originally presented at an undergraduate conference in Pennsylvania on Democracy and Religion in April 2007; it is reprinted here more or less as delivered.¹

You might have noticed that there were two titles floating about in the announcements for this lecture: the *dare* of democracy; and the *daze* of democracy. That one letter difference is a lucky typo: dare and daze mean pretty much the opposite--yet both work for the lecture! Democracy is in a daze these days; but we can dare each other to come out of the daze, into the spirited work of the democratic process. Of course after the hardworking day you've had at this conference, I won't take it personally if you fall into the doze of democracy!

However, you are here because you are in fact more alert, more awake, more willing to participate in the democratic process than most. You are here because you rightly sense that the democratic process may depend upon you. Notice that phrase, democratic process: you can't say 'imperial process' or fascist process or totalitarian process or oligarchic process, can you? Why not? Because *process implies an open-ended interaction*, and because democracy means an open-ended process of interaction, with no guaranteed outcome; it is experimental and adventurous by definition. It is the *most risky form of government ever developed*: and it seems to require an *ongoing revolution against the top-down pyramids of power* that remain an entrenched human habit.

Pyramid Power Plays

We human creatures started out in tribal, nomadic and village, structures. But in the later Neolithic we got bundled into city-states, the *civitas* that is the root of our word *civilization*. From then on we found ourselves increasingly organized in terms of a top-down authority of one kind or another. That political authority was usually legitimated by a transcendent power above the human. Such all-powerful deities were not characteristic of the spirituality of the villages and tribes, where deities and spirits mingled more fluidly, more intimately, in local processes. But the top-down authority, both political and theological, shaped great pyramids of power. From the time of the literal pyramids, through the Greek and then the Roman Empires, to its Christian heirs, Byzantium in the East and the Holy Roman Empire in the West, the pyramidal, top-down shapes of sovereignty underwent dramatic shifts. When the first modern nation states, the Christian empires of Spain, France and England emerged, they retained the hierarchical format of

¹ Thanks to Dhawn Martin for her editorial help and creative touch.

divinely sanctioned empire. In Europe it had produced the divine right of kings--the dogma that whoever rules rules by God's design, and to disobey the king is to sin against God. These sorts of governing hierarchies were about maintaining themselves; they based their stability on appeal to higher, heavenly authorities, on changeless and *unquestionable* truths. Now of course every government is *actually* involved in constant processes of interaction and change--like everything in the universe--but the top-down powers don't advertise that fact. Pyramids of power are not about process but about stasis. The religio-political entrenchment of that static order has been an overwhelming tendency of the last three millennia of so-called civilization.

I say *so-called*. I'm thinking of Ghandhi, who was famously once asked by a reporter: "What do you think about western civilization?" He replied: "It would be a good idea."

To live with civility in our ever more interwoven world, to grow toward a democracy that is at once local and global, is a good idea whose time has come. Or at least the *idea* has come. The democracy itself--well, that is still in process. But it is not clear that we the people, if we are *a people*, have yet learned the habits that will keep the process alive. Democracy in the U.S. was from the start understood to be a risky experiment. The founders, who dared the British empire to stop them, undertook this experiment with great solemnity. But also with great uncertainty. For instance, two decades into the experiment, John Adams, our second president, wrote to a friend these alarming words: "Democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide."² Have we proved him wrong, two centuries later? Or does Adams seem to be prophesying our present period, when so much of the public lives in a kind of dazed indifference to democracy? Democracy is a good old word we take for granted, like freedom. Democracy just seems to stir passions when we try to impose it militarily somewhere else. Which is just part of the daze. Freedom is the one value that you absolutely *cannot* impose. Freedom by definition doesn't happen top-down. Democracy suggests not a pyramid but a web of power. Its history was from the start recognized as a story of the future. So Walt Whitman wrote a half-century after Adams:

"We have frequently printed the word Democracy, yet I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the real gist of which still sleeps, quite unawakened.... It is a great word, whose history, I suppose, remains unwritten, because that history has yet to be enacted."³

Still true? Is democracy still in a doze? So can we dare each other to *enact* that democracy; to democratize? We need the verb. Dare to democratize.

² John Adams letter to John Taylor 15 Apr 1814.

³ Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas* 1871, cited in Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 1.

Good God Almighty?!

In *Democracy Matters*, the great culture critic and democratizer, Cornel West names three current threats to democracy. The threats function as dogmas: the first two are free market fundamentalism and militarism. The “third prevailing dogma” of the present moment West calls “escalating authoritarianism.”⁴ I figure my job tonight is to talk about this third danger to democracy, in which theology plays a dominating role. That authoritarianism offers the model of the strict father, as George Lakoff has shown.⁵ This traditionalism wants to unify us within heterosexist nuclear family structures; these are presided over by the strong father in the White House. And when asked if he consulted his father over the decision to go to war, President Bush answered “he is the wrong father to appeal to in terms of strength. There is a higher father that I appeal to.”⁶ So you see a pyramid of patriarchal power, religious and political, haunts us like a ghost.

The escalating authoritarianism calls upon the dogma of dogmas, the dogma of the top dog: that is, dog spelled backwards! But after all I am a theologian. How can I see God as a threat to democracy? It depends which God we are talking about! Do I mean the *Christian* God? Well again: it depends which one. Christianity has *always* split into rival factions, with conflicting theologies. Which is what drove religious freedom into our constitution, isn’t it: how could different forms of Christianity co-exist, with warring forms each trying to establish itself as the only true religion? But that logic got extended early by the democrat-republicans as they were called—the federalists were the conservatives, trying to protect Christian establishments: the freedom of religion means the freedom from any particular religion, and thus the freedom of every form of law-abiding *nonchristian* religion, *irreligion* as well. We’ll get back to the founders in a moment.

First let us get this much clear: religion has been essential to imperial politics until the twentieth century. Then arises for a while the imperialism of state atheism, with its own messianic drives. Religion has routinely confused the worship of God with the worship of power: or we should say the religions of the state have cultivated the worship of a God of power, who gradually centralized into the monotheisms, enabling the expansive empires of Islam and Christianity: one God, one superpower to unite the world, and one emperor to rule as God’s representative. Within Christianity this is what Cornel West and many of us refer to as *Constantinian Christianity*. They distinguish it from their own prophetic Christianity. The Hebrew prophets were among the earliest anti-imperialists. It was the Roman empire under Constantine that legalized Christianity; the emperor saw its universalizing mission no longer as a rival to the universal empire but as its best potential for unification.

⁴ West, 6.

⁵ See George Lakoff, *Don’t Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (White River Junction, Vt.: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004).

⁶ Interview in Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 421.

Worship of an omnipotent deity in the context of empire developed a Christianity of power-worship, which pretty much overpowered the gospel of love. The worship of power of course depends upon the stoking of a double fear: fear of evil enemies, barbarians, infidels and terrorists in this world, requiring the stern paternal ruler to protect us; and the fear of our own sin within us, and so of punishment in the next life. But Constantinian Christianity is not the only source of the fear-based faith and its God of power. There is another form. This is the apocalyptic tradition, inspired by the last book of the bible. The *Left Behind* series, the runaway bestselling apocalyptic fantasy novels, is popularizing a form of apocalypticism that its millions of readers now confuse with the bible. Its characters, like Rayford the pilot, are left behind at the rapture. Rayford was just a mainline, not a bornagain, Christian. But he joins the God squad and leads the on the grounds struggle against the evil antichrist, who happens to be the head of the United Nations. I'll read a passage from *Glorious Appearing*, where the so-called Jesus touches down, for his so-called Second Coming, just outside of Jerusalem:

Rayford watched through the binocs as men and women soldiers and horses seemed to explode where they stood. It was as if the very words of the Lord had superheated their blood, causing it to burst through their veins and skin.

The authors of this fiction make Jesus cite himself (talk about taking texts out of context!):

‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ Jesus said, ‘the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End, the Almighty.’...

And with those very first words, tens of thousands of Unity Army soldiers fell dead, simply dropping where they stood, their bodies ripped open, blood pooling in great masses. ‘I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen.’⁷

This superheated fantasy of absolute power and destruction would no doubt make Jesus roll over in his grave. (If he had one.) The word of God has become the ultimate Weapon of Mass Destruction. “The paranoid,” writes psycho-historian Charles Strozier about this sort of vision, “lives in a world of ...dualisms that separate out all good from pure evil. The paranoid is grandiose and megalomaniacal....”⁸ This grandiose dualism has fueled what is called the new religious right. It identifies us with the good and them, whoever they are, the enemy, the other, with pure evil. The historian Ira Chernus has argued in *Monsters to Destroy* that once you can make your enemies out to be a monster, they are no longer human. That is what is convenient about monsters: you cannot be expected to use diplomacy with them. You don’t negotiate with monsters, you just destroy

⁷ Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Glorious Appearing: The End of Days* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 2004), 225, 204.

⁸ Charles Strozier, e-mail message to the author, November 4, 2006.

them.⁹ The new religious right, which came into its own under Ronald Reagan, has been closely allied with a fundamentalist style of apocalyptic Christianity. It is based on a book of revelation that is, ironically, radically *anti-imperialist* in its biblical origins. It identifies human empire with the Whore of Babylon. We can talk about that irony if you like. We might say that the loss of the Soviet Union as the evil empire of godless communists did not make us more secure, as it was supposed to. It threw us, as a superpower, into a crisis; a new monster was needed to fill the enemy-void. For the sort of top-down corporate and military power that was moving into place--through democratic administrations as well--cannot be justified without a monstrous enemy. The second Bush was fortunate enough to find *his mission and his moment* in a new monster, a shifting amalgam of the terrorist and the fundamentalist Muslim. Never mind that Saddam Hussein supported neither.

And so the alliance with the religious right has been crucial in fanning the fires of an imperial apocalypticism. We have in the meantime neglected those emergencies, such as global warming, that have the potential to become man-made apocalypses. The planetary ecology is eclipsed in the interest of an unprecedented military expenditure and a war that now has no justification other than the fact that--we are at war. The circular logic of war requires supernatural justification: pure evil eludes rational explanation; the good patriarchs who lead the fight against it do not subject themselves to debate; in other words this dualism is allergic to democratic process.

Faith - "All in all" - Not "Just Another Brick in the Wall"¹⁰

So no wonder defenders of democracy in the United States are horrified at the coalition of religious and political right wings. No wonder they are worried about the disintegration of the Jeffersonian wall between church and state. Indeed some of them write best-selling books with names like *God is Not Great* and *The End of Faith* denouncing religion itself as the source of the world's worst evils.¹¹ The left has intensified rhetoric about a coming Christian theocracy--indeed Christofascism is a possibility. And Christian fundamentalist leaders like James Dobson are talking about "Islamofascism" as the new anti-christ; so American fundamentalism uses *Islamic* fundamentalism as justification for our own slide toward theocracy. God Bless America and United We Stand aren't just two clichés that pop up naturally in a state of fear: they are slogans of a religio-political campaign to unite us as a Christian nation against the new found monster.

⁹ Ira Chernus, *Monsters to Destroy: The Neoconservative War on Terror and Sin* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2006).

¹⁰ A play on Pink Floyd's "Another Brick in the Wall" from the album *The Wall* released 1979; lyrics available at www.pinkfloydonline.com/lyrics/thewall.html.

¹¹ Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Warner Twelve, 2007); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: Norton, 2004); and Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).

But of course democratic dissent sabotages the desired uniformity. To strengthen the nationalistic religion of the White House, the crusade must aim at both the worshipers of the *wrong* god abroad and of *no* god at home. Ann Coulter's *Godless* is one long rant on liberalism as a Godless religion. She suggests that "We should invade [Muslim] countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity." She identifies "Americans' Christian destiny" as 'jet skis, steak on the electric grill, hot showers, and night skiing.'" Comments Robert McElvaine: "For some reason, she fails to cite her source in the Gospels for her definition of Christian destiny, which amounts to: *Jesus died for our jet skis.*"¹²

No wonder many say that the only way to save democracy is to hose religion out of the public square. And don't they have the founders on their side? What about that wall?

So here is the heart of my argument: Jefferson's wall of separation between church and state remains a valuable metaphor for the constitutional freedom of religion. That freedom is indeed threatened by the aggressive mobilization of a nationalistic religion. But if we wish to protect that freedom, we must stop confusing the separation of *church and state* with the separation of *faith and politics*. Church and state are names for two powerful institutional structures, with a deep history of Constantinian fusion. In another setting one might say synagogue and state, or mosque and state. "Church" here is not a synonym for faith, or religion, or spirituality, which do not signify an institution but a perspective. It was the Euro-style *establishment* of a state religion, a state church, that was being terminated.¹³ What was being deconstructed was the assumption that conformity of theology is necessary to the cohesion of a people. In an emerging nation composed of multiple states, most of which had an established religion, this was an enormously risky experiment. The gamble, the dare, was that diversity of religious perspectives is actually better for the nation--and for religion--than uniformity. Let us look at Thomas Jefferson's indispensable thoughts on the matter.

Why, he asks in 1819, have our religious or irreligious perspectives, our opinions, been subjected to coercion? "To produce uniformity. But is uniformity of opinion desirable? No more than of face and stature." Indeed, he asks, "Is uniformity *attainable*? Millions of innocent men, women, and children, since the introduction of Christianity, have been burnt, tortured, fined, imprisoned; yet we have not advanced one inch towards uniformity...."¹⁴

¹² Robert S. McElvaine, "Jesusless: the Church of Conservatism," *Sightings*, June 30, 2006, http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/sightings/archive_2006/0630b.shtml.

¹³ "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...." Amendment I, *U.S. Constitution*. The Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses of the First Amendment represent a profound rejection of the vestiges and institutions of the *cuius regio, eius religio* idea in Europe born of the Peace of Augsburg and Peace of Westphalia.

¹⁴ Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on the State of Virginia," in *The Separation of Church and State*:

He continues with his imaginary dialogue with the opposite view, held then by the Federalists. "But every state, says an inquisitor, has established some religion. No two, say I, have established the same. Is this a proof of the infallibility of establishments? Our sister states of Pennsylvania and New York, however, have long subsisted without any establishment at all. The experiment was new and doubtful when they made it. It has answered beyond conception. They flourish infinitely. Religion is well supported; of various kinds, indeed, but all *good enough*; all sufficient to preserve peace and order: or if a sect arises, whose tenets would subvert morals, good sense has fair play, and reasons and laughs it out of doors, without suffering the state to be troubled with it. ..." (54, emphasis mine).

Well whether we'd say that my state of New York and your great Pennsylvania flourish infinitely, we should accept kudos for our original contributions to religious pluralism. Because that is what is being celebrated. In other words he is making a move that two centuries ago was extraordinarily rare, a move beyond mere *tolerance* for the sake of peace. Jefferson is beginning to affirm the *desirability* of a diversity of religious views. Of course tolerance is nothing to sneeze at. In the medieval period Islam had better laws of religious tolerance than any Christian empire. Tolerance was a great breakthrough in a set of colonies with laws on their books for prosecuting anyone who didn't believe in the trinity. For many sincere Christians today it is still hard to imagine why there should be all these different religions, when God so clearly offered us the truth in Jesus Christ.

But I am arguing with the founders that this is not just bad democracy but bad theology. It is a failure of the spiritual imagination; its theology is not an open process but a closed pyramid of power. The good enough religions that multiply under democratic conditions, and the good enough agnosticisms and atheisms as well, are not just an accident of freedom, to be tolerated as long as they behave. Jefferson is hinting at a spirituality of diversity that we have barely begun to understand and to disseminate. I'm suggesting that we need the help of that healthy spirituality in order to save democracy for the third millennium.

In other words we cannot protect the Jeffersonian wall between church and state from the religious and political interests that want it down without sometimes using *religious* arguments. The founders often use theological arguments, carefully couched in nonsectarian language: Madison called the freedom of religion "this truly Xn [Christian] Principle."¹⁵ Or back to Jefferson:

The right of conscience we never submitted, we could not submit, he says, to our rulers. "We are answerable for them to our God. The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg" (51-2).

Writings on a Fundamental Freedom by America's Founders, ed. Forrest Church (Boston: Beacon, 2004), 53. Emphasis mine.

¹⁵ James Madison, "A Detached Memorandum," [1816], in *Separation*, 133.

That is a *theological* argument for the *nonestablishment* of religion: the government should protect us from material injury, not from points of view! Precisely because we are answerable to God and not to our government for our conscience.

“The constitutional freedom of religion [is] the most inalienable and sacred of all human rights.”¹⁶ Again, “sacred” is not a casual term. It is meaningful only as a spiritual resonance. Why are we leaving those resonances to the right today? Of course the more inclusive theological language that he deemed appropriate in political discourse, the language of deism and “nature’s God,” a universal divine principle that is the source of our freedom, is as good as atheism for the religious conservatives then, or now. Jefferson was routinely and ferociously attacked by the Federalists as “godless.” So it is interesting to learn that among his most passionate supporters were the evangelical Christians, such as the Baptists in the south. For *they* were then objects of persecution by the establishment churches. In other words it is simply wrong to characterize Jefferson’s “wall” as protection against religion, or even against evangelical religion. It was not a case of democratic freedom struggling against religion, but of a broad and democratic faith struggling against the exclusivist, absolutist, and Constantian legacy of the churches.

My point is not that any of you need to make or believe Christian arguments for religious freedom. But if you cherish the freedom *of* religion and *from* any religious establishment, you don’t want to censor all language of faith from the public square. It won’t work: you will only assure that the voices of the religious right will get *their* theologies out there; and so the media can go on censoring not religion but the views of religious moderates and religious progressives. On this the political philosopher Jeffrey Stout is helpful:

There is a sense in which the ethical discourse of most modern democracies is secularized, for such discourse is not ‘framed by a theological perspective’ taken for granted by all those who participate in it. But secularization in this sense is not a reflection of commitment to *secularism*. It entails neither the denial of theological assumptions nor the expulsion of theological expression from the public sphere.¹⁷

In other words democratic education must develop a sensitivity for what assumptions can be taken for granted in the public sphere: whatever you believe, you cannot in your discourse presuppose that Krishna or Allah or Christ is Lord, and expect to be heard beyond your group. But you can quote from the Mahabarata, the Koran or the Gospels, sharing what inspires you: as long as you do not take for granted that others share your beliefs about the nature and existence of the divine. There is a kind of democratic bilingualism here: that we may have our own cultural and theological vocabularies, but we also become skilled in translating back and forth between our multiplicity of perspectives and a shared democratic discourse (when in Rome, do as the Romans...)

¹⁶ Jefferson to Virginia Board of Visitors [1819], in *Separation*, 48.

¹⁷ Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 93.

Martin Luther King was a superb democratic bilingualist, moving skillfully between an evangelical Black church context and a national discourse of human rights and freedoms. In fact most great steps of freedom in our history are steeped in religious language--I am thinking especially of the movement for abolition and for civil rights. King famously said:

When we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and hamlet, from every state and city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children - black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants - will be able to join hands and to sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty, we are free at last!'¹⁸

These days he would no doubt say "black and white people," not "men," but would he translate "all God's children" into "all of humanity"? And would he delete the quote from the spiritual? What rhetorical punch, what stirring resonances, would remain?

But I must also point out that he could make these translations between democratic and spiritual language so effectively because his theology had gone through an important educational process at Boston University School of Theology. He learned to interpret the gospel of love through the lens of some of the most liberal and philosophical theologies of his day.¹⁹

For us today old European forms of religious establishment are not a threat. But the new forms, with their weird mix of apocalyptic insecurity and establishment power, operate through free speech mechanisms. If they undermine democracy it is through media sophistication and the crippling of the educational institutions that can teach us to think critically and historically enough to take part in the democratic process! This anti-secularism thrives not only because of the plots of the right but because of the dogmas of the left: if secularists can only offer empty relativism, a universe of arbitrary chance and cold natural law, as an alternative, they will only be preaching to their choir. Instead of spiritual vision we just get political calculations from candidates and anger against Christian hypocrisy from

¹⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have A Dream" (1963), in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 220. Speech at Civil Rights March in Washington DC August 28 1963.

¹⁹ "Agape," wrote Martin Luther King, Jr. - who started out skeptical about the power of love - means "understanding, creative, redemptive, good will to all...". Martin Luther King, Jr., "Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience," in *Testament*, 46-7. Cf Martin Luther King's doctoral dissertation, "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman." Boston University. Differently from them, like Whiteheadian process theology and under the influence of his Bostonian Personalism, he insisted upon a personal deity mediating infinite creative process. See Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony and Postmodernity*, 1950-2005 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 152f.

the left. That hypocrisy is indeed dangerous. So it is at least good strategy to invite the voices of a democratizing theology into the progressive mix, where in fact they have always been anyway.

So what I hope you will consider is this: it isn't just that the wall between church and state is different from a wall between faith and politics, between spirituality and citizenship. My claim is stronger: if we want to defend that wall between church and state, and counter the anti-democratic effects of absolutist kinds of Christianity, it isn't enough to be defensive. We need to draw upon *theological* arguments for a thoroughgoing pluralism. Pluralism is precisely not the relativism that says anything goes. Relativism cannot argue for the ethical *rightness* of pluralism. An ethical and spiritual pluralism claims that diversity is a positive and risky good--that religious multiplicity, like the multiplicity of the species and of the galaxies, is expressive of a wisdom at the heart of creation.

Adventures in--Theology?

Let me conclude by hinting at the kind of theology that not only tolerates plurality and accepts the laws of democracy, but that considers any faith that drives toward uniformity simply *bad* faith. For this theology, any religion that claims that its church possesses absolute truth is dishonest. Such claims to absolute truth express, as the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche noted, a will to power. Masses of gifted people are driven to atheism by such a bully faith. But we might instead drive ourselves to a theology that deconstructs the pyramid of power within theology itself. Deconstruction is always an inside job. This would be the work of a theology in process, a theology that understands faith itself to be a democratic process, in which the language of faith emerges in an open-ended conversation. That would be true of the kind of Christian process theology which I, like Martin Luther King, Jr., studied in graduate school. We refuse to dump the biblical baby along with all the toxic bathwater of the history of Christianity. I ended up in theology because whenever I heard Jesus used to justify someone's power trip, my reaction was not--to hell with Jesus, but-- can we save him from these Christians?

So my theology is allied to people like Robert S. McElvaine, who writes of the "Christ-jacking of Christianity by the Jesusless right." "I am not a theologian," he writes. "I am not a biblical scholar. I am not a member of the clergy. But I do know how to read. And anyone who can read and uses that capability to peruse in the official Gospels what Jesus is quoted as having said can see that most of those who most adamantly proclaim themselves to be Christians today are not remotely practicing what Jesus preached. They aren't even *preaching* what He preached."²⁰ I happen to be a theologian, and I say amen. Blessed are the peacemakers, love of the enemy, if you have two coats give one to the poor, or—from Mt. 25.40²¹ – "...just as you did it to one of the least of these...you did it to me": how could the

²⁰ Robert S. McElvaine, *Grand Theft Jesus: The Hijacking of Religion in America* (New York: Crown, forthcoming), 6-7.

²¹ Mt. 25.40 – New Revised Standard Version Bible.

guy who says these things become the holy mascot of crusades, inquisitions, predatory globalization, earth-destroying greed, and yet another unjustifiable war spiraling out of control? But I don't need for example my secular Jewish husband to feel the same way about Jesus; I just am grateful that he sees that Jesus was a cool Jewish guy who is being recrucified daily by all the Christian anti-semetisms and anti-Islamisms and anti-feminisms and anti-gay-marriageisms advanced in his name. I feel in solidarity with a Jim Wallis, who in *God's Politics* denounces in very evangelical biblical terms how subchristian is the Bush presidency and its religious nationalism. But I am not myself an evangelical Christian. I share a biblical faith but only through an ongoing process of deconstruction and reconstruction.

So as a theologian I am committed to deconstructing the pyramid not just of Christian power but of *divine* power. For often the worship of *God's* power is just a symbol for the worship of power itself. And when God really means Power, the fearful faith that worships at its altar has profound theological, not just political, sources. The idealization of power as divine has produced the notion that nothing happens apart from the will of God--that at least everything important that happens in the world, like war or my death or your receiving your BA--happens according to God's plan. So unlike many of my evangelical friends, I consider the classical ideal of divine omnipotence--if that means that nothing happens without the will of God--to be a sub-Christian idea. Indeed it is an idolatrous notion. It suits the Roman empire better: "The gods," said Tacitus, "are on the side of the stronger." Of course if the divine is controlling what happens in history, by definition the winners in history are in power through divine power. The problem was captured neatly half a century ago when playwright Archibald MacLeish had his character J.B. tormented by this chant:

If God is God He is not good,
If God is good He is not God.²²

Somewhere along the line, "God" became synonymous with power.

By contrast, Alfred North Whitehead said "the power of God is the worship He inspires."²³ Whitehead is the main source of what is actually called *process theology*, just one strand of the liberal and liberation theological traditions that in different ways challenge the idealization of power.²⁴

If God is love, God is not power--unless we can so democratize our understanding

²² Archibald MacLeish, *J.B.: A Play in Verse* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1956), The Prologue, p 11.

²³ Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Macmillan/Free Press, 1967), 192.

²⁴ For more information on process thought and theology: [www ctr4process.org](http://www ctr4process org); John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976); and Jay McDaniel and Donna Bowman, ed., *Handbook of Process Theology* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2006).

and our practice of power that we begin to move in a new kind of forcefield: the power of love itself. A de-sentimentalized, political love, a liberating love, a love of liberty. And it is passionate enough to keep us waking ourselves and others out of the doze of democracy.

You don't need to believe in God to share this love. You can recognize that the evolution of democracy may be part of the creative process of the cosmos as a whole: it expresses the self organizing complexity that unfolds at the edge of chaos. We are that complexity, in our difficult, chaotic and marvelous pluralism. But if you do find theological language still inviting, you might claim that God is the ultimate democratic process, calling forth this wild and open-ended universe. God is neither virtually impotent nor classically omnipotent in this view--but empowering.²⁵ Of us, of all of us creatures, in our open-ended networks of process.

God dares us to claim our creative freedom: "The worship of God is not a rule of safety – it is an adventure of the spirit, a flight after the unattainable. The death of religion comes with the repression of the high hope of adventure."²⁶ This divinity dares us to democratize our faith, our churches and temples, our school and our nation. The experiment is open and ongoing; it hasn't failed yet, though it is threatened. But as Jefferson said, "It is in our lives and not our words that our religion must be read."

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²⁵ See also "The Democracy of Creation: Chaosmos and Counter-Apocalypse," in Catherine Keller, *God and Power: Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005); and David Ray Griffin, John B. Cobb, Jr., Richard A. Falk, and Catherine Keller, ed., *The American Empire and the Commonwealth of God: A Political, Economic, Religious Statement* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006).

²⁶ Alfred North Whitehead, *Science*, 192.