

JEFFREY W. ROBBINS  
Lebanon Valley College

## A POST-NATIONAL THEOLOGY OF EMPIRE

**A**S THE 2004 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION fast approaches, there is once again much talk about the role of religion in public life. Two recent reports come to mind. The first is from the June 21, 2004 cover story from *Time* magazine that, on the one hand, critically examines what reporter Nancy Gibbs calls Bush's "faith-based presidency," and on the other, charts the American electorate's attitudes about the proper relationship of politics to religion, and vice versa. Regarding the former, Gibbs borrows the much-publicized line from Ron Reagan Jr.'s eulogy for his father, where he stated in a not so veiled reference to President Bush that his father, former President Reagan, "never made the fatal mistake of so many politicians: wearing his faith on his sleeve to gain political advantage." Further, while Reagan was certainly religious and his presidency was animated by a certain religious conviction, "he accepted that as a responsibility, not a mandate." As Gibbs makes the same point, "It's the difference between praying that you're right and believing that prayer makes you right."<sup>1</sup> Regarding the latter point about the American electorate's attitudes, there is, predictably, no single answer to the question posed by *Time*: "Just how devout do Americans want their president to be?" On the contrary, no single issue seems to be as polarizing as that of religion, or perhaps more accurately, when compared with religion, no single issue reveals how deeply polarized the United States is as a nation. Meanwhile, candidates Bush and Kerry walk the fine line between courting religious voters and alienating the rest, between solemnly invoking the name of God and actually meaning what they say and saying what they believe.<sup>2</sup> Apparently, a little religion cures all political ills, but too much of a good thing can get downright

---

<sup>1</sup> Nancy Gibbs, "The Faith Factor," *Time* (June 21, 2004).  
<<http://www.time.com/time/archive/preview/0,10987,1101040621-650677,00.html>>

<sup>2</sup> For instance, the theologian and historian of American religion, Martin Marty, has said, "The problem isn't with Bush's sincerity, but with his evident conviction that he's doing God's will." As quoted by Jim Wallis in "Dangerous Religion: George W. Bush's Theology of Empire," in *Sojourners Magazine* (September-October 2003). <<http://www.sojo.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj0309&article=030910>>

scary. One can only imagine the invective the likes of Kierkegaard would direct against such transparent religious pandering.

But before you think I am bringing Kierkegaard to Bush's defense, turn to the fall 2003 issue of *Sojourners Magazine*. *Sojourners* identifies itself as a progressive Christian magazine of faith, politics, and culture. At times it reads like messages from the lone outpost of the old, liberal, and socially active variant of American Protestantism. Not surprisingly, it has taken strong stands against the post-9/11 militarization of America, and more specifically, the almost Manichean moral vision of President Bush that has driven his self-proclaimed "war on terror." In the fall 2003 issue, editor Jim Wallis' cover story was on "George W. Bush's theology of empire," in which Wallis not only faults Bush for his counter-productive and unjust doctrine of preemption, but also for his "bad theology." As Wallis writes, "American's foreign policy is more than pre-emptive, it is theologically presumptuous; not only unilateral, but dangerously messianic; not just arrogant, but bordering on the idolatrous and blasphemous."<sup>3</sup>

But what makes this a case of not only bad theology, but even more, "dangerous religion," as the article asserts, is its ideological sanctioning of an American empire. This is the overtly aggressive foreign policy charted by the "neo-conservative" policy advisers to Bush even before he came into office in the 1997 foreign policy statement, "The Project for the New American Century." In this document, the prospect of peace was predicated on "unquestioned U.S. military pre-eminence." This long-term strategic vision called on the U.S. to "accept responsibility for America's unique role in preserving and extending an international order friendly to our security, our prosperity, and our principles." Wallis' response is that "That, indeed, is empire," with the clear implication that as such, it must be resisted.<sup>4</sup>

In response to Wallis' central claim—namely, that the U.S. military's taking on the responsibility for preserving and extending a friendly international order effectively constitutes an empire—it does, and it does not. It is true, as critics such as Tariq Ali in his *The Clash of Fundamentalisms* have argued, that America has many of the traditional characteristics of an imperial power—most notably in the fact that it has a military base on every continent, and at least by Ali's count, a military presence in 120 out of the 189 member states of the United Nations. More damaging, perhaps, is the perception that it operates by a double-standard, turning a blind-eye to its allies, whether it be Israel, Saudi Arabia, or Pakistan, and singling out unfriendly regimes such as Iraq, Iran, and North Korea for

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

various human rights violations. For Ali, this follows the age-old rule of empires in the fact that they always act out of their own self-interests by championing ideals of equality and justice while exploiting the fabric of power. This fundamental hypocrisy intrinsic to imperialism breeds resentment and hostility, and eventually leads to what Chalmers Johnson terms “blowback” in the form of terrorism.<sup>5</sup> It is also why Ali argues in a characteristically provocative style that American imperialism is the most dangerous form of fundamentalism today because it is the “mother of all fundamentalisms.”<sup>6</sup>

One might argue that Ali needs a better understanding of the historical rise of religious fundamentalism, or that his neo-Marxist critique of the current political economy needs to be supplemented or corrected by a more nuanced theory of religion, but even more fundamental to both his and Wallis’ respective critiques is the operative definition of empire out of which they are working. For both, empire is inseparable from imperialism, and therefore, when Ali speaks of “American imperialism,” and Wallis of Bush’s “theology of empire,” they rightly critique the dangers of American hegemony and arrogance, but *wrongly locate its source within the spirit of nationalism*. The problem with this notion of empire as imperialism, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri explain in their landmark work, *Empire*, is that it is based on an antiquated ontology of sovereignty in which the nation-state stands as the autonomous subject. It operates by an exclusively linear logic of cause-and-effect, and will-to-mastery. It grants to the ideologues on the right their first premise—namely, that America, as the lone super-power, is truly the master of its fate, that world events are subject to its control, and that overwhelming force will always have the power to squelch resistance, even that of asymmetrical warfare. Put simply, it belongs to the past paradigm of modern political economy. To borrow from Hardt and Negri:

[Such a view] cannot account for the real novelty of the historical processes we are witnessing today. In this regard these theories can and do become harmful, because they do not recognize the accelerated rhythm, the violence, and the necessity with which the new imperial paradigm operates. *What they do not understand is that imperial sovereignty marks a paradigm shift.*<sup>7</sup>

A new political order of globalization that moves from the understanding of empire as an extension of nationalism, to Empire as a post-colonial, even post-imperialistic, concept and form of political intervention. This is a supra-national

---

<sup>5</sup> See Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (Henry Holt and Company, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Tariq Ali, *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads and Modernity* (London: Verso, 2002), xiii.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 8. Italics theirs.

global order in which the United States indeed occupies a privileged position, but it “*does not, and indeed no nation-state can today, form the center of an imperialist project.*”<sup>8</sup> Such is the challenge that Hardt and Negri pose to contemporary political theory, a challenge that is simultaneously a reactivation of Marx’s ever-evolving critique of capitalism and a call for greater conceptual precision and clarity.

This concept of Empire is also explicitly a challenge to what Hardt and Negri label as the “conspiracy theory of globalization,” which both Ali and Wallis subscribe to in certain degrees by attributing the present world order to “a single power and a single center of rationality *transcendent* to global forces, guiding the various phases of historical development according to its conscious and all-seeing plan.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, in accordance with this new concept of Empire, the more damning critique of American foreign policy in general, and Bush’s moral leadership in particular, is that they are in service to, if not pawns of, the new supra-national global order. In other words, American treasure and lives are spoiled on feeding a system that already is, and that will continue to be, its own undoing.<sup>10</sup> This is the great irony and paradox that we must now face, the fact that “Empire is born and shows itself as crisis,” and that “the becoming of Empire is actually realized on the basis of the same conditions that characterize its decadence and decline.”<sup>11</sup>

Long before Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*, sociologist of religion, Robert Bellah, detected this critical point of transition with regard to both relations between nations and between religion and politics. For instance, in the conclusion to his article, “Civil Religion in America” (1966), he speaks of a “third time of trial” that Americans then faced:

The first time of trial had to do with the question of independence, whether we should or could run our own affairs in our own way. The second time of trial was over the issue of slavery, which in turn was only the most salient aspect of the more general problem of the full institutionalization of democracy within our country. . . . We have been overtaken by a third great problem which has led to a third great crisis,

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, this critique is reflected in the structure of Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* and, I would assert, the reason for its great potency as a work of critical journalism. The first half of the film lays out the connections between Bush’s family, friends, and business associates with the Saudi royal family. This is not, as it has frequently been interpreted, to suggest a global conspiracy to which Bush is privy, but on the contrary, it is pointing out the seen and unseen market forces, which *even* Bush and the Saudi royals are powerless to control. This frames the personal stories of loss and sacrifice that are highlighted in the second half of the film.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 20.

in the midst of which we stand. This is the problem of responsible action in a revolutionary world, a world seeking to attain many of the things, material and spiritual, that we have already attained.<sup>12</sup>

With the first two times of trial, the major symbols and themes of American civil religion emerged, such as the ideals of religious liberty and equality. The third, however, has less to do with the United States and its own national sovereignty, than with “the attainment of some kind of viable and coherent world order,” and “the emergency of a genuine trans-national sovereignty.”<sup>13</sup> A true appreciation of this moment of crisis and transition would result not in the exportation of specifically American values, or the establishment or extension of American hegemony, but rather, in Bellah’s estimation, “it would result in American civil religion becoming simply one part of a new civil religion in the world.”<sup>14</sup>

To put Hardt and Negri together with Bellah, this realization of the current world order as a post-imperialistic Empire, and the recognition of the emergence of trans-national sovereignty, allows for a post-national theology of Empire that is not driven by self-interests and not predicated on military prowess, and more positively, that makes possible new forms of trans-national solidarity and a more potent agonistic political strategy.



Many of the works reviewed in this second annual “review issue” of the *JCRT* treat these topics either directly or indirectly. For instance, both Robert Cox’s *Body and Soul* (reviewed by Aaron Urbanczyk) and Mark Oppenheimer’s *Knocking on Heaven’s Door* (reviewed by Michael Gilmour) help contribute to our historical understanding of the making of American civil religion by giving voice to the almost opposing expressions of the American religious experience—the one, as Urbanczyk points out, the largely underrepresented tradition of 19th century American Spiritualism, and the other, the almost taken-for-granted “mainline” religious traditions in the age of the 1960’s counterculture. *Predicting Religion* (reviewed by Daniel Rossi Keen) can be seen as picking up where Cox and Oppenheimer leave off, and where Bellah suggests we are moving as a global culture, by the editors challenging contributors to do the following: “make a prediction about the state of religion in 30 to 50 years from now and be as bold and concrete in the prediction as you can.”

---

<sup>12</sup> Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.” <[http://www.robertbellah.com/articles\\_5.htm](http://www.robertbellah.com/articles_5.htm)>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

Both *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (reviewed by David Reinhart) and *Freedom and Orthodoxy* (reviewed by Vincent Biondo) deal with questions of globalization, terrorism, and the relations between the East and West. The former contains a record of conversation in the wake of 9/11 with two of the most significant Western European philosophers of our time, Jacques Derrida and Jürgen Habermas. The latter represents a critical voice from the world of Islam, in which Anouar Majid condemns American foreign policy as a form of cultural imperialism. One possible antidote to this destructive model of cultural exchange as cultural imperialism can be found in Richard E. Rubenstein's account of the extended dialogue that took place between Christian, Muslim, and Jewish scholars of Aristotle throughout the medieval period. Rubenstein chronicles this story of cooperation and cultural interaction in his *Aristotle's Children* (reviewed by Noëlle Vahanian).

The other books reviewed, with the exception of William Mitchell's *Me++*, continues the *JCRT's* tradition of being a primary site for discussions pertaining to the burgeoning field of continental philosophy of religion and postmodern theology. As the argument above hopes to demonstrate, however, this religious analysis does not, and must not, exist in a vacuum. That is why this site is devoted to both cultural and religious theory, and it is why we continue to invite broader and more innovative cultural analyses from the worlds of film, popular culture, art, technology, race, gender, political economy, etc.

**JEFFREY W. ROBBINS** is Assistant Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Lebanon Valley College in Annville, PA, and Associate Editor of the *JCRT*. He is the author of two books, *Between Faith and Thought: An Essay on the Ontotheological Condition* (University of Virginia Press, 2003), and *In Search of a Non-Dogmatic Theology* (Davies Group, 2004).

© 2004 Jeffrey W. Robbins. All rights reserved.

Robbins, Jeffrey W. "A Post-National Theology of Empire." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 5 no. 3 (August 2004): 1-6. PURL: <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/05.3/robbins.pdf>