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The Rise of Christian Fascism and Its Threat to American Democracy

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Dr. James Luther Adams, my ethics professor at Harvard Divinity School, told his students that when we were his age -- he was then close to 80 -- we would all be fighting the "Christian fascists."

The warning, given 25 years ago, came at the moment Pat Robertson and other radio and television evangelists began speaking about a new political religion that would direct its efforts toward taking control of all institutions, including mainstream denominations and the government. Its stated goal was to use the United States to create a global Christian empire. This call for fundamentalists and evangelicals to take political power was a radical and ominous mutation of traditional Christianity. It was hard, at the time, to take such fantastic rhetoric seriously, especially given the buffoonish quality of those who expounded it. But Adams warned us against the blindness caused by intellectual snobbery. The Nazis, he said, were not going to return with swastikas and brown shirts. Their ideological inheritors had found a mask for fascism in the pages of the Bible.

He was not a man to use the word fascist lightly. He had been in Germany in 1935 and 1936 and worked with the underground anti-Nazi church, known as the Confessing Church, led by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Adams was eventually detained and interrogated by the Gestapo, who suggested he might want to consider returning to the United States. It was a suggestion he followed. He left on a night train with framed portraits of Adolf Hitler placed over the contents of his suitcases to hide the rolls of home-movie film he had taken of the so-called German Christian Church, which was pro-Nazi, and the few individuals who defied the Nazis, including the theologians Karl Barth and Albert Schweitzer. The ruse worked when the border police lifted the tops of the suitcases, saw the portraits of the Führer and closed them up again. I watched hours of the grainy black-and-white films as he narrated in his apartment in Cambridge.



Adams understood that totalitarian movements are built out of deep personal and economic despair. He warned that the flight of manufacturing jobs, the impoverishment of the American working class, the physical obliteration of communities in the vast, soulless exurbs and decaying Rust Belt, were swiftly deforming our society. The current assault on the middle class, which now lives in a world in which anything that can be put on software can be outsourced, would have terrified him. The stories that many in this movement told me over the past two years as I worked on "American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on

America" were stories of this failure -- personal, communal and often economic. This despair, Adams said, would empower dangerous dreamers -- those who today bombard the airwaves with an idealistic and religious utopianism that promises, through violent apocalyptic purification, to eradicate the old, sinful world that has failed many Americans.

These Christian utopians promise to replace this internal and external emptiness with a mythical world where time stops and all problems are solved. The mounting despair rippling across the United States, one I witnessed repeatedly as I traveled the country, remains unaddressed by the Democratic Party, which has abandoned the working class, like its Republican counterpart, for massive corporate funding.

The Christian right has lured tens of millions of Americans, who rightly feel abandoned and betrayed by the political system, from the reality-based world to one of magic -- to fantastic visions of angels and miracles, to a childlike belief that God has a plan for them and Jesus will guide and protect them. This mythological worldview, one that has no use for science or dispassionate, honest intellectual inquiry, one that promises that the loss of jobs and health insurance does not matter, as long as you are right with Jesus, offers a lying world of consistency that addresses the emotional yearnings of desperate followers at the expense of reality. It creates a world where facts become interchangeable with opinions, where lies become true -- the very essence of the totalitarian state. It includes a dark license to kill, to obliterate all those who do not conform to this vision, from Muslims in the Middle East to those at home who refuse to submit to the movement. And it conveniently empowers a rapacious oligarchy whose god is maximum profit at the expense of citizens.

We now live in a nation where the top 1 percent control more wealth than the bottom 90 percent combined, where we have legalized torture and can lock up citizens without trial. Arthur Schlesinger, in "The Cycles of American History," wrote that "the great religious ages were notable for their indifference to human rights in the contemporary sense -- not only for their acquiescence in poverty, inequality and oppression, but for their enthusiastic justification of slavery, persecution, torture and genocide."

Adams saw in the Christian right, long before we did, disturbing similarities with the German Christian Church and the Nazi Party, similarities that he said would, in the event of prolonged social instability or a national crisis, see American fascists rise under the guise of religion to dismantle the open society. He despaired of U.S. liberals, who, he said, as in Nazi Germany, mouthed silly platitudes about dialogue and inclusiveness that made them ineffectual and impotent. Liberals, he said, did not understand the power and allure of evil or the cold reality of how the world worked. The current hand-wringing by Democrats, with many asking how they can reach out to a movement whose leaders brand them "demonic" and "satanic," would not have surprised Adams. Like Bonhoeffer, he did not believe that those who would fight effectively in coming times of turmoil, a fight that for him was an integral part of the biblical message, would come from the church or the liberal, secular elite.

His critique of the prominent research universities, along with the media, was no less withering. These institutions, self-absorbed, compromised by their close relationship with government and corporations, given enough of the pie to be complacent, were unwilling to deal with the fundamental moral questions and inequities of the age. They had no stomach for a battle that might cost them their prestige and comfort. He told me, I suspect half in jest, that if the Nazis took over America "60 percent of the Harvard faculty would begin their lectures with the Nazi salute." But this too was not an abstraction. He had watched academics at the University of Heidelberg, including the philosopher Martin Heidegger, raise their arms stiffly to students before class.

Two decades later, even in the face of the growing reach of the Christian right, his prediction seems apocalyptic. And yet the powerbrokers in the Christian right have moved from the fringes of society to the floor of the House of Representatives and the Senate. Forty-five senators and 186 members of the House before the last elections earned approval ratings of 80 to 100 percent from the three most influential Christian right advocacy groups -- the Christian Coalition, Eagle Forum, and Family Resource Council. President Bush has handed hundreds of millions of dollars in federal aid to these groups and dismantled federal programs in science, reproductive

rights and AIDS research to pay homage to the pseudo-science and quackery of the Christian right.

Bush will, I suspect, turn out to be no more than a weak transition figure, our version of Otto von Bismarck -- who also used "values" to energize his base at the end of the 19th century and launched "Kulturkampf," the word from which we get culture wars, against Catholics and Jews. Bismarck's attacks, which split Germany and made the discrediting of whole segments of the society an acceptable part of the civil discourse, paved the way for the Nazis' more virulent racism and repression.

The radical Christian right, calling for a "Christian state" -- where whole segments of American society, from gays and lesbians to liberals to immigrants to artists to intellectuals, will have no legitimacy and be reduced, at best, to second-class citizens -- awaits a crisis, an economic meltdown, another catastrophic terrorist strike or a series of environmental disasters. A period of instability will permit them to push through their radical agenda, one that will be sold to a frightened American public as a return to security and law and order, as well as moral purity and prosperity. This movement -- the most dangerous mass movement in American history -- will not be blunted until the growing social and economic inequities that blight this nation are addressed, until tens of millions of Americans, now locked in hermetic systems of indoctrination through Christian television and radio, as well as Christian schools, are reincorporated into American society and given a future, one with hope, adequate wages, job security and generous federal and state assistance.

The unchecked rape of America, which continues with the blessing of both political parties, heralds not only the empowerment of this American oligarchy but the eventual death of the democratic state and birth of American fascism.

Chris Hedges is the former Middle East bureau chief for The New York Times and the author of "War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning."

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