

True Christianity in the midst of American shock

A brief black and Anabaptist account

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A quick glance at the timelines and social media feeds of my progressive and left leaning friends reveals an ongoing shock in response to the character and politics of mainstream Christianity in the United States, however, we should all remember that many followers of Jesus have known for a very long time that western Christianity was severely diseased. Some of the surprise and outrage was sparked by the release of data revealing that 81% of white evangelicals supported Donald Trump's election, as well as that a majority of white mainline Protestants did as well.

For many with a semblance of historical memory, Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again" told a patriotic narrative in which stealing land from Native Americans and forcing them to migrate into reservations, as well as centuries of genocide and war against their tribes, should have disqualified our country from being defined as great and exceptional. That problematic narrative coupled with the marginalizing of 250 years of stealing and enslaving millions and millions of African people, followed by new white supremacist systems like Black codes and Jim Crow apartheid, or convict leasing and sharecropping systems ought to negate any claims of American greatness. Of course, our ongoing white supremacist paternalism, terrorism, and oversight of both communities (as well as other minorities) suggest that we have a strange definition of greatness that does not match up with the greatness Jesus defined as humble service to others.

What is it that we will return to in an effort to fulfil this "again"? Unless someone can provide a definition of greatness that is not based on our imperial militarism or dependent on downplaying our long history oppression to create wealth, then it will

continue to make the slogan appear to be a white supremacist desire for the mythic “good ole days”. That is, you know, before people of color and women began struggling for equality and justice. Such myths are hegemonic narratives that ignore important voices. This pseudo-history is rightly troubling for many people. Yet, for many people what was even more troubling than the slogan itself was the explicit xenophobia, Islamaphobia, racism, and sexism that persisted throughout the election (and afterward). The campaign promises to ban Muslims, to build a wall, to deport undocumented immigrants, to intentionally misrepresent immigrants as especially dangerous, or to halt criminal reform and possibly bring back stop and frisk practices (as just a few examples), all signaled the kind of world that too many mainstream Christians wanted to reinstate. For Jesus followers, explicit Jim Crow white supremacy and explicit patriarchy of the 1950s America are not God’s kingdom come.

That some self-identified Christians were captivated these campaign promises, while other self-professed Christians were, in their own words, willing to “overlook” these things for various political reasons, is a hard pill to swallow for many other segments of the Church. Those commitments do not align with the Jesus revealed in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In scripture, Jesus centralized poor people, vulnerable women, and marginalized Samaritans, among others, in a way that subverted rather than bolstered the social hierarchies of his day. Therefore, when the poll numbers were released that a majority of white Christians supported Trump, it created deep concern for many other Christians (including some evangelicals) who could not stomach such support by so many American Christians. Nonetheless, with such shock expressed by some Christians to the current state of the Church in this land, it might be helpful to remember that many Christian communities have lived through, and testified about, these realities from the underside of a non-Jesus-shaped western/white supremacist Christendom for a long time. Many non-dominant cultural Christian communities have pointed us to those failures for centuries and gesture us towards a better way.

Diseased and Distorted Religion and True Christianity

Most people are at least partially familiar with the Protestant Reformations of the 16th century but not everyone is conscious of the Radical Reformation that took place at the exact same time. Within the Radical Reformation of the 16th century emerged Christian communities that were deemed

“Anabaptists” and heretics by the magisterial reformers who ruled their regions. They became a despised and persecuted Christian community *within* Western Europe. Thousands and thousands of their converts were killed, often by drowning, while others were burned at the stake or tortured to death. These faith communities, given these experiences, had a particularly keen perception of just how distorted Christianity had become in Western Europe.

One particular Anabaptist leader would eventually emerge among the second generation of leaders (because most of the first generation of leaders had been killed). He had a significant influence on the living Anabaptist tradition and community that would continue. However, he also had to provide his leadership while on the run from Magisterial *Christian* leaders that continued to try to kill him for the entirety of his life. **I am referring to Menno Simons.** Simons once asked, “Where is the true religion, namely, to visit widows and orphans in their distress and to keep yourself unspotted from the world?” For him, a true Christian lived by the life and teachings of Jesus, and if one did not it meant you were only a Christian in name only. He encouraged his listeners, “do not depart from the doctrine and the life of Christ.” For Menno Simons and most other Anabaptists, western Christendom had left Jesus behind, rejected his Way, and hence no longer resembled a life of discipleship. Anabaptists of that day rejected the status quo alliance of the church and the state that coercively enforced an unjust social system and that was exploiting poor peasants. In fact, there is evidence that some of the Anabaptist movements were inspired by poor peasant rebellions taking place, though many increasingly refused to take up the same violent methods these peasants utilized. For them, something like “the Benedict Option” would not be something to practice because Christendom was crumbling. Instead, people needed to form into faithful tight-knit discipling communities that cared for one another precisely because they were in the belly of the beast of a distorted *Christian* social order that persecuted them, and where the way of Jesus had lost its meaning. It lost its meaning because the entire social order was baptized in Jesus’ name despite rejecting his way of life and commitments. It sanctioned all sorts of violence and oppression while worshipping the Prince of Peace. Menno Simons, however, famously argued for “true evangelical faith”, which would necessarily manifest the teachings of Jesus in the life of a believer if it had really taken root:

For true evangelical faith is of such a nature that it cannot lie dormant, but manifests itself in all righteousness and works of love; it dies unto the flesh

and blood; it destroys all forbidden lusts and desires; it seeks and serves and fears God; it clothes the naked; it feeds the hungry; it comforts the sorrowful; it shelters the destitute; it aids and consoles the sad, it returns good for evil; it serves those that harm it; it prays for those that persecute it; teaches, admonishes, and reproves with the Word of the Lord; it seeks that which is lost, it binds up that which is wounded; it heals that which is diseased and it saves that which is sound; it has become all things to all men. – Menno Simons

Anabaptists, of course, are not the only people that possess a centuries long tradition that cites distortions in western Christianity, because enslaved Africans in the United States repeatedly articulated, through pain and suffering, the mangled expressions of religion that emerged in the land under the banner of Jesus' name. For Christians like Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass, the white supremacist systems of enslavement were reinforced through mainstream Christianity. They knew deep in their souls that such religion had nothing to do with the life and teachings of Jesus. Nothing could be more obvious to them than that American Christianity was, in fact, an enemy of Jesus. One had to choose sides, for and against American Civil Religion, because there was no neutral place to stand. If the religion of America was a cover for the status quo oppressions of its day, then it stood in fierce opposition to the person and politics of Jesus Christ who came to set free oppressed people (Luke 4:18-19).

For Sojourner Truth, a former slave, the silence of the Church in the midst of injustice, the endorsement of oppression by this distorted Christianity, and the ironically absurd rejection of the religion of Jesus was an indictment on the Church. She had no other option but to name this hypocrisy, and in doing so, provide an opportunity for ecclesial repentance. That is, by finally exposing their failure to follow Jesus as they supported a racist and violent slave system, they could once again choose to return to the roots of what it meant to be the church. She contended:

Such an abominable state of things is silently tolerated, to say the least, by slaveholders—deny it who may. And what is that religion that sanctions, even by its silence, all that is embraced in the 'Peculiar Institution?' If there can be any thing more diametrically opposed to the religion of Jesus,

than the working of this soul-killing system—which is as truly sanctioned by the religion of America as are her ministers and churches—we wish to be shown where it can be found. – Sojourner Truth

Frederick Douglass also made points along the same lines. He wrote his narrative of his enslavement and journey to freedom in a way that people might assume Douglass was against Christianity altogether. He could be read this way because he frequently pointed out how Christian slave masters were the most violent to live under, so to clarify his view he decided to conclude with an appendix to his autobiography. For him, like Truth, there was the widest of gaps between the American civil religion of the land that professed Jesus in name, and the actual person of Jesus whose life and teachings were against everything that the nation had been. For Douglass, if one truly loved Jesus then it necessarily would lead to hating the religion practiced in America that sanctioned slavery. The religion of America, to Douglass, was violent, corrupt, and ultimately anti-Christian. It is best to let Douglass say it in his own words because few have matched his clarity on the subject:

What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the slaveholding religion of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. – Frederick Douglass

A Cure for Christendom, White Supremacy, & American Civil Religion

With such long traditions that have highlighted these troubles for centuries, the distorted character of American Christianity need not shock us now. Whether we look to Anabaptism and the ongoing critiques of western Christendom that exist today, or Afro-American Christianity and the double critiques of Christendom and white supremacy, each provides us with centuries of prophetic imagination that gesture us towards seeing anew the failed vocation of the church adhering to American civil religion. This is a very old problem in the West rather than

a new one.

It is appropriate to note, of course, that some white Anabaptists in North America, while continuing to rigorously critique western Christendom, have failed to take such critical insights to their logical conclusion, which would have them subvert white supremacy as well. ***White supremacy, after all, is the child of western Christendom.*** The faithful transition of Anabaptism from Western Europe to North America (particularly the United States) requires a reassessing of the social order of this context and new solidarities with those that are the stigmatized and oppressed in this place.

Likewise, it is vital to note that some Black Christians in the 20th century began entangling themselves deeply with a liberal political imagination, which fails to provide a truly radical and robust critique of American civil religion and empire. Classically liberal politics in the United States are inspired by the American Dream (which is a myth) and only call for patchwork and improvements (rather than revolutionary and thorough transformation) on our way to a supposedly “more perfect union.” This political posture may get one elected into government positions but it ultimately falls short of the trajectory of early Enslaved Africans, like Truth and Douglass, who dared to speak truthfully as they lived in the belly and underside of a violent and oppressive empire. Faithfulness will require the courage to speak truthfully, to seek concrete practical change for the sake of people struggling day to day, while also pressing on in the revolution in the way of Jesus with a vision of God’s comprehensive shalom for all creation.

Anabaptism and Afro-Christian faith help us recognize the ways our lives are so frequently not participating in God’s reign manifested on earth, while also guiding us back to the roots of Christian life; following Jesus.

When we take seriously the stories and the multiplicity of voices that arise out of Black and Anabaptist history and contemporary society, especially side by side, a helpful standpoint emerges. If we choose to follow Jesus from the vulnerable underside of the world we begin to radically participate in the subversive and unfolding reign of God, even when under the nose of an authoritarian and white supremacist ruler.

From Perpetual Shock to True Discipleship

There continues to be the widest possible difference between what many self-professed mainstream American Christians do and say, and what Jesus

himself did and said, and also what Jesus is doing and saying in our midst today. Self-professed Christianity in the United States rarely resembles Jesus. Too often it has been diametrically opposed to the revelation of Jesus we receive in scripture and through counter-Christian traditions found in many Black and Anabaptist churches. We can continue in shock and surprise by these failures, which only reveals our own complicity in not recognizing what has been going on for a very long time, or alternatively, we can take up the ancient Christian practices of lament and confession for our sins, and then repent in the way of Jesus. Such repentance is a radical and subversive mode of being. It is a life turned towards faithful resistance, so that evil is overcome with good, and so that we together can yield to the creative possibilities of God's renewed world opening up to us. This is available in Christ because his Spirit is at work liberating, healing, empowering, renewing, encouraging, and ultimately making shalom through prophetic messianic communities. God persists in this faithfulness even while the chaos of violence and injustice continue to battle against us. What we need right now is not perpetual shock; what we need is a recovery of the true manifestation and vocation of Jesus in our lives.