

Political demons

For theologian and civil rights activist William Stringfellow, understanding American politics means taking demons seriously.

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Century illustration

In January the most powerful people on earth—every former living president and vice president, foreign dignitaries, billionaires, and career bureaucrats—gathered to welcome Donald Trump’s return to the White House. Joe Biden smiled as he said,

“Welcome home.” A Michigan pastor, Lorenzo Sewell, hawked his own meme coin seconds after delivering his benediction (as the President’s own meme coin soared to more than \$10 billion in market value). Elon Musk, the richest man on earth, greeted the crowd with a Nazi salute he later promised on X, the platform he owns, was simply a greeting straight from his heart.

Streaming the whole charade on C-SPAN, I was struck by how these ostentatious displays of power only underscored a deeper powerlessness. All weekend the attendees celebrated the machine of immiseration and war whose levers they’ve spent their whole lives striving to pull. They seemed to celebrate their own degradation, relishing nothing so much as their servility before that machine, their stupefied willingness to pull its levers just as it demands. It felt like the skin-crawling finale to a horror movie, when those who seem to sit at the heights of wealth and power are revealed to be the abject servants of demonic powers.

I realize that might sound melodramatic. Talk of “the demonic” isn’t very fashionable on the left these days. But watching the inauguration, I kept thinking of a commentary on Revelation that was published during the height of the Vietnam War by theologian and civil rights activist William Stringfellow. Stringfellow was frustrated by Christians who read biblical accounts of demons either as anachronistic metaphors for mental illness and social problems or as crudely literal portraits of otherworldly monsters. He read the Bible’s description of the demonic as a sophisticated social critique, one that gives the key to understanding the dehumanizing systems that run our world and the moral bankruptcy of the supposed leaders who serve them. Like his contemporary Walter Wink, Stringfellow insisted that understanding America means taking seriously the Bible’s warnings about demons, powers, and principalities. The Christian left would do well to study his political demonology.

A White graduate of Harvard Law School, William Stringfellow moved to a tenement house in Harlem in 1956 to live alongside and represent poor Black and Puerto Rican clients. He was also active in the Episcopal Church, fighting for the ordination of women and against the church’s longstanding homophobia. This last fight was personal—Stringfellow was himself a gay man, in a long-term partnership with the poet Anthony Towne. Their shared home would serve in the late 1960s as a shelter for Daniel Berrigan, the Catholic priest who went on the lam after burning hundreds of draft records.

Stringfellow saw his own political radicalism as downstream from a fierce commitment to old-time Bible-thumping Protestantism. (No hippie, he stares from the dust jackets of his books with the gaunt severity of a Puritan schoolteacher.) He read his Bible with deadly seriousness, finding in scripture a wide-ranging critique of the powers of death ruling our world. A good biblical literalist, in his 1973 book *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* he names these powers “demons.”

This combination of political radicalism and biblical Christianity makes Stringfellow a strange but refreshing voice today, when Christian nationalism is ascendant and the liberal opposition has quit the stage. His work can help the Christian left cut through the confusion of our moment and show us how to offer an unabashedly theological critique.

In Stringfellow’s reading, the “demons” of scripture refer to entities that are real but do not exist materially (such as abstractions, institutions, social phenomena). These entities have three main aspects. First, the entity operates as if it had a life and will of its own. Second, it gives those who serve it the titles and trappings of power while in reality subordinating those people to its own end. And third, it has as its end only death.

“Hence,” Stringfellow writes, “for a man to be ‘possessed of a demon’ means concretely that he is a captive of the power of death in one or another of the manifestations which death assumes in history.”

There are many such manifestations in our society: abstractions like “America;” institutions like the presidency or the military; social phenomena like war or White supremacy. Each of these entities lives independently of the people who seem to control it. Each offers superficial prizes like wealth, prestige, and medals to those most willing to serve them. Each brings only death.

Crucially, for Stringfellow, it is those who seem to be the most powerful people who are most in thrall to demonic powers. “There is unleashed among the principalities in this society,” he writes,

“a ruthless, self-proliferating, all-consuming institutional process which assaults, dispirits, defeats, and destroys human life even among, and *primarily* among, those persons in positions of institutional leadership.”

Those who appear to be in charge are “left with titles but without effectual authority; with the trappings of power, but without control over the institutions they head; in nominal command, but bereft of dominion.”

He declares, “the most poignant victim of the demonic in America today is the so-called leader.”

I saw this on display at the inauguration. In exchange for baubles like titles and medals and applauding crowds, those in high office handed over their moral freedom and prostrated themselves to the powers of death.

Stringfellow describes America as a demonic principality, Revelation’s Babylon the Great, but he nevertheless insists on hope. That hope is twofold. First, demonic powers are fallen, just like us; they are not inherently evil. This hope brings enormous responsibility. We don’t get to stand blessedly apart from the powers and principalities ruling our world, retreating into our families and churches as little pockets of moral purity. We’re fallen creatures in a fallen world, and we are bound up with these death-driven powers. Their guilt is our guilt. The blood they spill is on our hands. Our task is to find some way to foster life *within* the fallen powers, praying all the while for their downfall.

Second, we can have hope that if our so-called leaders are the most likely to be subordinated to demonic powers, perhaps some measure of moral freedom is preserved among those on the underside of power. “One can,” Stringfellow writes, “discern and identify maturity, conscience, and, paradoxically, freedom in human beings *only* among those who are in conflict with the established order” people like “prisoners, resisters, fugitives, and victims.” Those looking for hope in these early days of a new Trump administration should look to those most targeted by the powers of death: immigrants, trans people, climate activists, the disabled. The list grows daily.

Stringfellow insists there will always be moments when the near-omnipotent reign of death is overthrown, if only for an instant, in outbursts of rebellious life. He calls moments like this “the Jerusalem occurrence,” in which the heavenly city flashes out from the depths of Babylon. Jerusalem occurrences cannot last; they are fleeting and often crushed just as swiftly as they arise. But “the Jerusalem occurrence is sufficient unto itself,” he writes:

“There is—then and there—a transfiguration in which the momentary coincides with the eternal, the innocuous becomes momentous and the great is recognized as trivial, the end of history is revealed as the fulfillment of life here and now, and the whole of creation is beheld as sanctified.”

Watching the inaugural events felt like seeing the servants of Babylon celebrating their servitude. But grim as the present is, we can hope that Jerusalem occurrences will happen. Schools will come together to block ICE from snatching children. Families will welcome a member’s gender transition with joy. Palestinian students will have their grief heard and honored. Such moments will not happen nearly as often as they should, and when they do happen, power will move quickly to stamp them out. But they will have happened. Jerusalem will have occurred.