CAN AMERICA BE CHRISTIAN?

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Sunday in Ordinary Time

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

This past week I read *The Imperial Cruise* by James Bradley who also gave us *Flyboys* and *Flags of our Fathers* both of which were turned into popular movies. Bradley is the son of John Bradley one of the men who raised the iconic American flag on Iwo Jima in 1945.

Bradley is haunted by WW II. In 2005 he retraced the Pacific route taken in 1905 by President Teddy Roosevelt's emissaries to the Philippines and Japan. The emissaries included Roosevelt's famous and sassy young daughter Alice and his Secretary of War, William Taft.

Bradley set out to discover the historic forces and decisions that led to the violent and deadly clash between Japan and the USA. Along the way he turned up, among other disturbing things, a toxic form of Christianity embedded in American foreign policy.

Can America be Christian? Was the Good Samaritan a Christian?

But a Samaritan while traveling came near the wounded victim; when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he gave money to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, asked Jesus, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The lawyer said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:25-37)

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Can America be Christian?

According to James Bradley, President Theodore Roosevelt thought so. According to Bradley and his many footnoted citations, Roosevelt thought it was the white man's singular destiny—or as Rudyard Kipling put it: "The White Man's Burden"—to advance Christian civilization ever westward by killing or subjugating, if necessary, any non-Aryan, which is to say non-whites, that stood in his way. You might recall, that same myth of Aryan or Teutonic superiority inspired Hitler to cleanse German soil of non-Aryans. According to Roosevelt and others of his ilk, Anglo Saxons in the British Isles and later in America had become the ultimate protagonists and perfect embodiment of this myth.

Roosevelt was not peculiar in this regard. He was a man of his times. It's hard to believe but in the 19th century, racial theories like that were taught at Harvard and Yale as *scientific truth*. Mark Twain, William Jennings Bryan and many others didn't buy it. But many educated Americans did.

Of course, most people who held such bizarre beliefs were not in a position to make foreign policy or wage war half way around the world. Roosevelt and his secretary of war, however, were. And those racial beliefs prompted them to colonize the Philippines, subjugating, torturing, and slaughtering Filipinos by the tens of thousands in the early years of 20th century—all in the name of liberating them from the domination of the Spanish empire and Catholicism, the "wrong kind" of Christianity. Not surprisingly, this "dark side" of America's so-called liberation of the Philippines (and Cuba) has been kept out of most textbooks.

The Philippines, as it turns out, was just a steppingstone for more westward conquests.

Roosevelt viewed the world though racial lenses polished by what he and others called "muscular Christianity." He regarded Chinamen—with their pigtails and "dresses"—as a race in decline. "Chinks," he called them.

But, ironically, Roosevelt saw the Japanese as a rising race, nearly as intelligent and competent as whites and therefore capable of a western form of aggressive industrialism and militarism. At that time no Asian country had much of a military. Roosevelt believed the Japanese could and should develop a military machine to enable westward expansion.

According to Bradley, Roosevelt dubbed the Japanese "honorary Aryans" and secretly (and unconstitutionally, as it turns out) supported their conquest of Korea in 1905 so that Japan might continue the divinely mandated expansion of the "Aryan way" westward into China, at least until America could get there itself. According to Bradley, Japan was thrilled by America's supposed blessing for expansion into Asia. But, in less than four decades Japan would feel betrayed by the United States.

Can America be Christian?

I'd like to think so—but not in that imperialistic, muscular Christianity sort of way. How in the world or how in the Bible did our fellow Americans ever see that in Jesus, the merciful and compassionate one who is the heart of Christianity?

Can America be Christian? The short answer is, yes and no.

Yes, the American *people* can be Christian. Any American can be a Christian with a capital "C." But not all Americans are or want to be and that's a good thing. Diversity is what keeps the web of life healthy. And diversity keeps societies and cultures healthy and thriving. Any American can be Christian with a capital "C" and any American, be they Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or no religion at all can act "christian" with a small "c" if by that we mean acting along the lines of the Good Samaritan and the Golden rule.

Can America be Christian? If we mean its people, then the answer is YES—in more ways than one.

But if by "America" we mean the government then the answer is *no* and a qualified, *yes*.

The First Amendment of the Constitution prohibits Congress from establishing or favoring any one religion the way England at one time favored the Church of England or France at one time favored the Roman Catholic Church or Sweden the Lutheran Church or Scotland the Presbyterian. I for one am grateful that we are a secular nation. Secular humanism is not such a bad philosophy compared to a lot of others out there.

It's true: America is not an official Christian nation. But I'd like to think our state and federal governments and agencies and other corporate entities can *act* in a Christ-like way. Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the great theologians of the 20th century, was active in public debates between pacifism and just war theories leading up to our engagement in WWII. Niebuhr believed love was primarily a personal ethic not suited for governments and such. Justice he believed was the corporate expression of love.

Indeed, persons can love others in a way that governments can't. But persons and governments can certainly practice justice.

Maybe governments can't love their enemies in the way of Jesus who would love his enemies even if it killed him. But governments can practice justice in the way and in the spirit of Jesus, caring for those whom life has beaten down and left forsaken along the highways and by ways of life. If America were a kingdom we'd want the king or queen to act that way. But America is a republic. So why wouldn't we want our representatives

to think and act that way within the limits of constitutional law?

America is not an official Christian nation but many of the founders of this country were inspired and shaped by the Judeo-Christian tradition. Today's lessons accent two convictions woven into the heart and soul of America.

First, the God of our biblical faith is especially mindful and protective of the weak and vulnerable. Psalm 82 goes out of its way to distinguish one certain God from all the rest who don't care for the poor.

God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods God holds judgment: "How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked." Rise up, O God, judge the earth; for all the nations belong to you! (Psalm 82)

And if God is that way, should we not also be that way?

Second, and finally, God is God of *all the nations*. Not just one or a few. As our pledge of allegiance puts it: we are a nation *under* God. Not over God or beside God. *Under*.

According to the lesson from Old Testament for today (Amos 7), those nations who somehow feel exceptional or chosen are judged strictly. Ancient Israel, like America, felt chosen to be a light to the nations. But Israel, like America, grew complacent, corrupt and full of violence.

The Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. And the LORD said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." [A plumb line determines if a wall is "straight or crooked."] *Then the Lord said, "See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again give them a pass; the high places of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of the king with the sword."* (Amos 7:7-17)

That was then. This is now. No, we don't believe in a God who smites the wicked in some direct fashion. But we do believe that personal, social and political behaviors have consequences. As the Apostle Paul put it: *God is not mocked. We shall reap what we sow.*

What is America sowing at home and abroad these days?

May God help us to sow and grow in grace, wisdom and love. May God help us work for justice and peace with and for all people and nations of the world.

Thomas Jefferson once said: I tremble for my country when I remember that God is just. And that's one reason we pray for our nation—and all others—even as we sing this hymn written by G. K. Chesterton in 1906. "O God of Earth and Altar."