

The Coming Exile

There are times in history when a society's blindness to the evil of its choices becomes so complete that later generations can only wonder, "How could so many have refused to see?" Apartheid in South Africa, segregation in the United States, and Nazism in Germany are three recent examples. Why didn't people see what was happening and do something about it?

It's sobering to remember that during each of those times the Christian Church was right there in the middle—the South African Dutch Reformed Church, the segregated church in the US, the National Socialist Church in Germany—not, unfortunately, as a voice against the evil, not even as a silent bystander looking the other way, but as an active apologist for the sin of the culture.

The depth of a society's evil can be hidden from virtually everyone in that society. What's obvious to everyone outside the society can be seen by almost no one inside. Germany, to take the most extreme example, had been among the most cultured and sophisticated societies in the world, yet the vast majority of that educated people willingly participated in Nazism.

Until the veil is lifted, even great evil can seem "normal" to an entire society.

We have entered such a period in American history, a period when our blindness to the evil of our culture will have profound and disastrous consequences. Just as deeply rooted in our society as was segregation, Nazism, or Apartheid, the evil of our culture seems just as normal to us now as theirs did then. Unfortunately, our situation is far more dangerous and threatens more destruction than even Nazi Germany.

The invasion of Iraq is the most recent escalation. The 28-day conflict is more accurately described, however, as the culmination of an on-going war that began in August 1990 comprising continual military attacks and a devastating economic blockade. For twelve years, US and British planes regularly bombed targets in both the north and south "no-fly zones," which covered considerably more than half the area of the country and had been established not by UN mandate but simply by American fiat, contrary to international law. The UN economic sanctions, continued only at the insistence of the United States, were the most comprehensive, longest-lasting economic blockade in history and were responsible, according to UN estimates, for the deaths of over 500,000 children. They were the only weapon of mass destruction used

in Iraq after 1990.

When I visited Iraq last December as part of the Iraq Peace Team, I saw first-hand the results of this brutal campaign: sanitation plants that no longer worked, allowing over 500,000 tons of raw sewage dumped daily into Iraqi waterways; decaying water treatment plants that were unable to cope with the polluted water, allowing contamination of 40% of drinking water; children dying in hospital wards because they lacked proper medications; an economy in shambles. One of every eight children died before their fifth birthday. I talked with Iraqis (sometimes with government minders present, more often not) who uniformly expressed outrage at US policies that had brought such devastation to their country. While the Iraqis are publicly welcoming their “liberators” as I write this, I wonder how long that euphoria will last, and I fear the consequences of what comes after it for the Iraqis who have become my friends.

The war in Iraq, however, is only the latest manifestation of an accelerating, dangerous spiral in our political, cultural and economic decision making that will have profound and disastrous consequences for humanity, indeed, for the Earth.

At the center of this vortex are American affluence and consumerism that demand a disproportionate share of the world’s resources. We have begun to acknowledge the environmental destruction implicit in our consumption. We are less able to see the *injustice* of our affluence. Not only would it be impossible for everyone to rise to our level of affluence before depleting resources and despoiling the earth, but our wealth depends on economic and political structures that impoverish others. Our standard of living is neither just nor sustainable.

In order to maintain our affluence, we have committed ourselves to an extreme, free-market economics as if it were one of the Ten Commandments. Contrary to popular assumptions, this subjection of all values to “the market” is a relatively new phenomenon, less than thirty years old. The founders of our nation, even the founders of capitalism, would not recognize it, much less ascribe to it, yet politicians have recently even begun speaking as if the free market were one of the fundamental American freedoms.

Whatever else one says about the market, it should be clear by now that radical capitalism—unfettered by government—leads inexorably to lethal injustice and to ecological destruction. American commitment to the affluence this free market brings us, however, makes us unwilling to acknowledge that our material comfort is built upon the backs of both the world’s poor and our own grandchildren. Within the last generation, we have forced the rest of the

world to accept this same economic structure, damaging the local economies of many poor countries. Corporate globalization has in practice undermined democracy and freedom and led to the impoverishment and death of millions of people.

Our commitment to such a death-dealing system requires media for justification and military power for protection from the backlash of the vast majority who lose out. Over the last twenty years there has been an accelerating concentration of media. We get our information from fewer and fewer sources—all owned and operated by the wealthy. There is well-documented bias in the way the news is presented, especially news that would threaten the system. The media's willingness to take seriously the flimsy weapons-of-mass-destruction rationale for the invasion of Iraq is just one example. That no one in the mainstream media seems interested in finding out and reporting how many innocent civilians were killed by our bombs in Afghanistan or Iraq is striking.

The media also bring us advertising, that highly refined science that spends billions of dollars a year to expose each of us to thousands of media images a day with one constant message, "Consume more," linked carefully with our desires for sex, companionship, family, security, and power. And most of the media entertainment that is not explicit advertising advertises consumption, anyway. It is the lives of the affluent with expensive apartments, designer clothes, fine food, and, usually, serial sex that we observe and come, at some level of our consciousness, to consider normal. There is no escaping these images.

American economic power, and the resultant injustice, cannot ultimately be maintained without military force. Military spending itself is the lifeblood of some of the largest corporations, whose interest is always further military buildup. And so the United States has lately found itself on the wrong side of almost every conflict in the developing world as we have militarily supported non-democratic governments that accede to our economic interests. This tendency has accelerated as the "war" on terrorism has led us to overlook any concern for human rights violations among countries who will support us.

The results have been a clearly documented, growing inequality in our nation and in the world along with accelerating ecological destruction, yet our responses have generally been to blame the poor for their poverty (or pretend that their poverty is but a stage on the way to universal affluence), and to trust future technology to protect our grandchildren from the environmental effects of our consumption.

Environmental devastation—with the loss of much life—surely awaits us, even if we were to decide tomorrow to reverse field (which, it should be obvious, we will not): Global warming, thinning of the ozone layer, destruction of the rain forests which provide the world with oxygen, pollution of air and water, the daily loss of entire species. Each of these and countless others come with devastating consequences that are not just theoretic possibilities but virtual certainties given our political and economic choices.

Competition for scarce resources will increasingly pit the rich against the poor. The result will be ecological destruction as the poor countries seek in vain to catch up and military conflict as the resources shrink.

As the urgent need for international cooperation has become evident during the last decades, the United States has increasingly refused to take part. The list of international treaties the United States has sabotaged in the last several years is long. These have been agreements by virtually every other country in the world to deal with international problems that threaten our common safety: the Kyoto accords, a treaty to ban land mines, the ABM treaty with Russia, an agreement to reduce international “small arms” sales, and the International Court . Against the rest of the world we have financed and supported almost without constraint Israel’s occupation of Palestine. The invasion of Iraq. The list goes on. These are not isolated political actions or the result only of some reactionary political conspiracy. They have been largely bi-partisan decisions supported by majorities in both houses of Congress, rendered inevitable by the social and economic structure we have created within our country and, increasingly, in the rest of the world.

It is important to recognize that the consumerism, the power of corporations, the sophistication of advertising, the extent and bias of the media, the resort to military force and the increasingly nationalistic political decisions are not separate elements but integrated components of “Empire.” The whole is far more powerful than the sum of its parts. Is democracy even possible, for instance, when the sophisticated power of advertising is held almost exclusively by the wealthy and powerful?

Perhaps more accurately and importantly, what we face is the manifestation of the Powers and Principalities in our time. As followers of Jesus, we must learn to perceive those aspects of these diverse components that are the spiritual powers to be opposed spiritually.

From one perspective, none of this is really new. Empire always controls the military and the

media. Empire is always controlled by and for the wealthy few and exploits the many who are poor.

But there is something new and terrifying in the equation. What is different in our time are the technological sophistication available to terrorists and our capacity to utterly devastate the environment. Since 1945, we have had for the only time in human history, the capacity to wipe ourselves out, and that capacity grows every year.

Technological advances over the next few decades will refine weapons of mass destruction making them available to virtually any committed group of people. More potent, genetically modified, easily disseminated biological strains; more powerful poisonous chemicals; more compact, easily transportable nuclear weapons; nanotechnology that will create virus-like, self-reproducing machines we can hardly imagine; and other weapons we cannot conceive are all in our future.

The Empire has correctly identified terrorism as a central threat. It has mistakenly concluded that military might will be an effective response. Our obsession with Iraq's weapons of mass destruction only put a finger in the dike. Any committed group can (or will soon be able to) obtain weapons capable of obliterating masses of people. We are developing tools that we are not, as a species, capable of handling. As long as extreme injustice and hopelessness persists in the world, potentially catastrophic terrorism will thrive.

Given the scale of the coming ecological damage and the inevitability of small groups acquiring weapons of mass destruction, human beings have only a short time to grow up spiritually if we wish to escape massive destruction. There is a race on between our technological growth and our spiritual growth. It does not look good. For some things it is already too late.

Jeremiah has been frequently on my mind over the past few years. The similarities between our situation and Jeremiah before the exile of Judah to Babylon in 587 BCE are striking. The ten northern tribes of Israel had long since been dispersed, lost to history, leaving only the southern nation of Judah. Jeremiah saw that Judah had lost its way. The imagery he uses is raw: Judah has been a prostitute running after lovers, sullyng herself, her land, and God, her spouse. Despite this promiscuity, God had been willing, even anxious to take Judah back. But eventually things progressed too far, things went on too long. Judah was no longer capable of returning to God.

There are consequences to breaking the covenant with God ... to abandoning the poor, to taking on other powers as one's god, to forgetting that love and forgiveness (not self-aggrandizement) are the purpose of life, and to creating security through military power rather than the protection of God. The kind of security most of us yearn for is simply not available ... ever. The security that God offers is real, but very different from what we usually want.

What Jeremiah saw was the coming exile. Long before anyone else could even smell the decay, Jeremiah saw that the rot had spread everywhere. It was too late. While repentance and forgiveness are always possible, Jeremiah could see it was not going to happen. Things had gone too far. Jeremiah's message was, "It's over, folks. Prepare for exile."

Jeremiah saw the coming military and political disaster as a spiritual crisis, the result of disobedience and sin. We must see our situation similarly. The discussion, therefore, belongs in the church. We will have the resources to respond appropriately only if we understand that the coming judgment is, in fact, judgment.

So, how do we respond?

Perhaps the major issue is hope. I am not optimistic for the immediate future of our country or the world. The military, political, economic, and social arcs now ascendant do not lead toward a beneficent future. Devastating ecological damage seems certain, there is no sign of decreasing militarism in the world despite the threat of weapons of mass destruction, an unfettered free market is devastating the poor of the underdeveloped world, AIDS is ravaging Africa and India, and so on. We will not find our hope in optimism.

Jeremiah held no optimism for the future of Judah, either. He even suggested capitulating to the enemy forces to avoid further destruction. Judah was going to be destroyed by Babylon. Jeremiah did, however, have hope, for he realized that even in the coming devastation, God was still God. God's purposes would ultimately be fulfilled. Jeremiah would not himself see the return from exile, but he knew of God's love for Israel and the ultimate shalom that would come.

Therein we can find our hope, too. The power of love in the world is still ascendant; God's love will still be victorious. Perhaps God will raise this culture of ours out of its devastation; more likely, the culture will be utterly destroyed. But out of the future God will create something beautiful. In that we are confident.

But what do we *do*? First, we must educate ourselves about what is happening, recognizing that—despite the economic, political, and military power we see marshaled around us—America is in that stage of inevitable decline marking any Empire that forgets justice for the poor. Despite appearances, we are already in exile. We must begin to speak this harsh, prophetic word to the larger community. In the coming years there will be more events like September 11, further markers of our decline. As these happen, we must not again be caught with nothing to say against the dominant voices. We must be ready to interpret such events spiritually to the wider community as consequences of our sin and disobedience.

Second, we must convince ourselves and others that the love and forgiveness of the Gospel have become practical political necessities, not just spiritual niceties. The world has changed forever, and we no longer have the luxury of leaving anyone out. Without universal justice, without love and forgiveness, we will simply not survive. This means, at the least, some kind of guaranteed economic equity around the world. We can no longer think just in terms of the United States.

An extraordinarily hopeful sign is the world-wide resistance to the Iraq invasion, mirrored also in the US and especially in the churches. This was an unprecedented movement that succeeded in mobilizing the governments of most countries to resist American militarism. Similarly, the anti-globalization movement is raising awareness and resistance. But, at least within the United States, this resistance has arisen only against specific, seemingly isolated problems: the invasion of Iraq, the abandonment of the poor, corporate globalism, global warming or other environmental problems, and so on, while other equally serious issues remain almost unaddressed. Last year's Nuclear Policy Review that raised once again the threat of nuclear annihilation or last September's National Security Policy that established as policy preemptive attack against any potential threat have drawn little sustained protest. Love and forgiveness must become our foreign policy. Literally.

Third, we must recognize how thoroughly the Empire contaminates each of us. We will need to go back to the Book of Revelation to discover how the early church—facing similar issues—lived through the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. (Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther's study of Revelation, *Unveiling Empire*, is a good place to begin.) We will have to read Bonhoeffer to see how the Confessing Church lived through Nazism. Yes, the

church has always been accomplice to Empire, but parts of the church—for example, the black church in South Africa, the Confessing Church in Germany—have also been the leaders of the opposition. As we study Bishop Tutu, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and others, we will discover that our life in community becomes utterly essential if we are not to be overwhelmed by the powers that surround us.

This question of *how* we remain an alternative community in opposition to the culture bears study. For most of world history, merely declaring one's opposition to the Powers led to persecution. Remaining in opposition to the culture may have been difficult, may have led, in fact, to death, but there was no question about how to remain in opposition. One announced one's opposition and, perhaps, did some form of action, and things rolled from there.

But advanced Western culture has refined cooptation to an art form. Walter Brueggemann has suggested that if Moses were alive today, Pharaoh would make him into a talk-show host. Our alternative voice becomes one among many, an example of society's "tolerance of dissent." God's word becomes one voice on a panel discussion. The powerful seduction of the culture continues, indefinitely, just waiting for our resolve to grow weary. We are lured back or find ourselves suddenly enmeshed without knowing quite what happened. How do we as a community remain in opposition? It is an important question we must continue asking.

One thing we know: Our disciplines become more important than ever: prayer, meditation, proportional giving, study, worship and liturgy, commitment to the poor, and simple living. Living in exile, the need for celebration, for instance, becomes very real.

Finally, we must find ways to act. Walter Wink writes, "It is of the nature of the Powers that they wish to appear invincible. They do not want their great vulnerability revealed." [\[1\]](#) One of the perverse effects of the torrent of media images that washes over us every day is to make our little efforts feel meaningless. But as Wink also suggests, "There is no such thing as objective powerlessness. Our belief that we are powerless is a sure sign that we have been duped by the Powers."

[\[2\]](#)

We don't have to do big, important things. It is, indeed, up to God to use our small, individual acts of faithfulness to achieve God's purposes. But we must do *something*

if for no other reason than to defy the propaganda of the Powers. And allow God responsibility for the results.

Our task is paradoxical, to live in a society that will probably collapse yet continue to work with hope for democratic, people-centered structures. This is a fitting request for people of faith, accustomed to God's accepting our offerings and fashioning them into newness, miraculous and surprising despite our lack of vision. We accept the command to be faithful rather than effective.

For most readers of *The Other Side*, this essay will not be a call to suddenly change course. Many of us are already deeply involved in doing what we must with no room to add one more thing to our overloaded calendars. We must recognize, however, that we are a community in exile, that we live in opposition to our culture, and that we desperately need each other. The primary task of the church is to be a community of resistance. I am convinced that it is only within such community that we will have the strength and fortitude to continue the long struggle.

Our little, raggedy groups are our only chance.

[1] Wink, Walter, *The Redeeming Power of the Small*, Fellowship, Jan-Feb 2000, p 4

[2] Ibid.