

We Live in a Time of Spiritual Crisis

I just read a cover article in the *Nation* magazine that blames Martin Luther for the current state of Protestant evangelicalism in the United States. Church history was never my forte, but I am nonetheless confident that the author has overstated his case.

There is much in Luther's thought, as well as his life, that was less than exemplary if not downright pernicious. To his credit he took on the corrupt religious establishment of his day, but his anti-Semitism and his siding with the nobility against the peasants in the Great Peasants' Revolt of 1524-25 can hardly be defended. His influence on Christianity was enormous, but it was surely complex and does not translate directly into a prototype or manifesto for the smug authoritarianism, racism, jingoism, nativism, and moral turpitude that characterize those "evangelicals" who continue to bestow their enthusiastic support upon the venal, vile, vindictive man who currently occupies the White House.

Someone else I just read observed that Trump is a civil servant, working on a four-year contract, residing in public housing and living off the public dole. Not that there is anything wrong with that, but really! – What is it about this man that he can get away with almost anything that would be disqualifying in anyone else and come out virtually unscathed or even more admired by his base supporters, a huge portion of which count themselves evangelical Christians?

Our country is in the midst of a political crisis, one that seems unprecedented in scope and danger. But I have to believe that it's also a spiritual crisis, and that evangelical Christians are hardly the only ones responsible. For decades, now, Americans have been unwilling to make the kinds of sacrifices and commitments that our deteriorating circumstances demand. Christian social philosopher Cornel West, a leading public intellectual and African American, has written of "the relative collapse of integrity, honesty, and decency," and then spelled out the failings that cannot be laid entirely at the feet of Trump and his enthusiasts.

West points to neoliberal policies of economic neglect and the self-righteous arrogance of elites as distinguishing features of our failing republic. As a nation, we have done little to improve the lot of the most vulnerable in our society and world. We have tolerated if not endorsed economic policies that continue to widen the gap between rich and poor, been far too complacent about global climate change and its already devastating effects (barely mentioned during the last presidential campaign), catered to Wall Street, failed to repudiate and prosecute torturers and war criminals, countenanced the drone killings of innocent people and pervasive interventions and economic exploitation by the U.S. military and corporations.

It's fair to say that most Americans, Christian or not, fail to appreciate just how complicit they are in the sufferings of others. Conversely, they – we – lack a sufficiently compelling sense of our common good. Perhaps earlier generations of Americans, especially Christians, had a better sense of this because they were better acquainted with the idea of sin. Perhaps they better understood that, whatever ails us, they were part of the problem and also had to be part of the solution. Perhaps they were also able to recognize and resist the presence of the demonic in their midst. In any case, the way of Jesus is now being thoroughly trashed.

Make no mistake, the demonic now thrives in our midst, manifest at the highest levels in unabashed egoism infused with contempt for human kindness and decency. We must not succumb to its absurdities, be seduced by its allures, or cowed by its threats.

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