

Are We Rome?

In the book of Revelation, the word “Babylon,” is a code word for the Roman Empire. It is the word John uses as he describes his vision of what is, or what was to come. At a Thursday Night NFL game this month, Baltimore Ravens linebacker, Terrell Suggs ran onto the field during the pregame introduction in a Roman Gladiator Mask. The game was played at the M&T Bank Stadium in Baltimore, not the Roman Colosseum. Suggs removed the mask and played in his traditional football head gear. He said he wore it to get his team and the crowd into the game early.

Are we Rome? Some would say yes; some would say no. I say yes, but we don't have to be. Rome was once a Republic; Some would say America was also a republic at one time, but for me it is a difficult argument to make. A “Republic” is defined as a state where supreme power is held by the people and their elected representatives, and which has an elected or nominated president rather than a monarch.

In the embryonic states of our nation women and people of color were having an extremely difficult time to say the least. One race enslaved, one race slowly being eradicated through genocide, one group of our population being kept barefoot and pregnant, and none of these groups being able to vote. Yes, these circumstances did eventually change to a degree one could argue, yet I prefer to think of our democracy as Dr. Cornel West thinks of it, and will occasionally remark about this idea--- American democracy is an experiment. A grand one; a noble one, but an experiment nonetheless.

Historically speaking, I don't believe that becoming an Empire was the identity that was intended in the beginning of this nation. After the attack at Pearl Harbor, The US dramatically ended its long isolation from world affairs by entering into World War 2. Yet in our drive to protect the so called “Free World” from what we were told and believed was Soviet imperial designs, and to fight the Communists takeover of the globe, (known then as the “Domino Theory”) the US made the world secure for capitalism, and in effect constructed its own empire.

For those who would argue against contemporary American being a reincarnation of the Roman Empire, one must admit that there are similarities. Televised sports with its food, drink, and other conveniences as “bread and circuses,” or the way we treat our immigrants who venture from

south of the boarder as “barbarian hordes.” Our political pollsters are modern day oracles who do not seek their clues in the flight of birds or slaughtered sheep, but who predict the success or downfall of our politicos in opinion polls.

The president’s aides are the new “Praetorian Guard,” and the deployment of our legions all over the globe reek of the stench of empire. The Roman Empire could not, and the American Empire, cannot get enough of laws, lawyers, and lawsuits. We both believe deeply in private property. We both relish in the humiliation of public figures. Both Rome and America through comedy and satire, but contemporary America through talk radio and Court TV. Both Rome and America accepted enormous disparities of wealth and allowed the gap to widen. Ramsey MacMullen, one of the most prominent modern historians of Rome, has said that five centuries of imperial social evolution can be reduced to just three words: “Fewer have more.” (Rome? P. 15).

The American Eagle and The Roman Eagle are one. The comparisons to Rome are either a grim warning or a call to action, depending on who one is conversing with.

The Pax Americana that may have once existed was because of our military might, just as it was during the Roman Empire during the first two centuries CE. America’s difficulties in Iraq, Afganistan, Iran, Lebannon, North Korea, and elsewhere, are seen in many circles as simply the cost of empire, a bump in the road, not as a dead end.

The Roman poet Virgil was quoted as saying in his poem, The Aeneid, “Remember Roman, that it is yours to lead other people. It is your special gift. “We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall. We see further into the future,” remarks former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. (Are We Rome, p. 24).

Charles Krauthammer, Pulitzer Prize winning syndicated columnist and political commentator says this, “America is no mere international citizen. It is the dominant power in the world, more dominant than any since Rome. America is in a position to reshape norms, alter expectations, and create new realities. How? By unapologetic and implacable demonstrations of will.” (Are We Rome? By Cullen Murray P. 7)

William Kristol, editor of the conservative, Weekly Standard, puts it this way: “If people want to say we’re an imperial power, fine.” (Ibid. p.7) Others

see the American Empire as dangerously over extended abroad, just as the Roman Empire was in its last 200 years. The historian and columnist Chalmers Johnson, who has written a book entitled, *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and The End of The Republic*, reminds us that Roman imperial powers mounted up over hundreds of years. Ours are likely to arrive at the speed of FedEx. Imperial overreach is the culprit. Our military ambitions around the globe have exceeded our capacity to pay for them. Another part of the problem is moral and political. Empires destroy liberty—always have and always will. One cannot say we want to promote peace around the globe, and then be the largest distributor or seller of arms at the same time on planet earth. Our imperial need for secrecy, surveillance, and social control, all in the name of national security, is corroding our institutions. Dr. King puts it this way:

“Yet, in spite of these spectacular strides in science and technology, and still unlimited ones to come, something basic is missing. There is a sort of poverty of the spirit which stands in glaring contrast to our scientific and technological abundance. The richer we have become materially, the poorer we have become morally and spiritually. We have learned to fly the air like birds and swim the sea like fish, but we have not learned the simple art of living together as brothers and sisters.” King also says that, “A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual doom.”

Yet President George W. Bush stated on August 31, 2002 from his ranch in Crawford, Texas, at one time referred to as The Bush Bungalow, “Our nation is the greatest force for good in history.”

Mr. Bush is really no different from many Americans of our time. He refuses to see that the United States of America dominates the world through our use of military power. We have witnessed first-hand, whether we wanted to or not, the militarization of our nations police departments. And yes, we will definitely need our military to fight the Islamic State called Isis or Isil. Only history will reveal whether this could have been avoided or not. Due to government secrecy, and of course laziness, our populace is often ignorant to the fact that our legions garrison the globe. Our country has military bases on every continent except Antarctica. Ron Paul says that our nation has military personnel in 130 nations and 900 overseas bases. (Ron Paul on Monday, September 12, 2011 in a Republican Presidential Debate in Tampa, Florida). Our military's very presence constitutes a new form of empire. Empires are expensive to maintain.

We operate secret basis outside of our country to monitor what the people of the world, including our own citizens are saying, faxing and emailing one another. Our military and intelligence installations bring enormous profits to the Haliburtons of the world, and other civilian industries, which design and manufacture weapons for the armed forces or to undertake contract services to build and maintain our far-flung military outposts. Author Chalmers Johnson writes in the prologue of his book, *The Sorrows of Empire*, “ Americans like to say that the world changed as a result of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. It would be more accurate to say that the attacks produced a dangerous change in the thinking of some of our leaders, who began to see our nation as a new empire, a new Rome, no longer bound by international law, the concerns of allies, or any constraints on its use of military force. Still in the dark about why we were attacked the State Department began warning us against tourism in an ever growing list of countries. Why do they hate us? Was a common complaint heard on talk shows. The answer was because those other nations are jealous of us. But a growing number finally began to grasp what most non-Americans knew and had experienced over the previous half century—namely, that the United States was something other than what it professed to be, that it was in fact, a military juggernaut intent on world domination.” (p.4)

During the beginning of the war in Afghanistan, the only information available to the public and its representatives came from the Department of Defense. The military had become expert at managing the news.

I would say, though it is really difficult to pin point exactly when, but perhaps that after 911 we openly admitted to empire. Openly, because the media began using certain words which I believe were sanctioned by our government—words like, “preventative war”, and “regime change.” Words like, “collateral damage,” and “illegal combatants,” and “insurgents.” These words were supposed to justify what the Pentagon was doing. It was supposed to justify our post 911 foreign policy. Last I checked the so-called founding fathers of this nation were insurgents against Britain. Ho Chi Minn was an insurgent against the French.

The result has been perpetual war, never ending war against an idea called “terrorism.” Can war be waged against an idea? My daughter will grow up

in a nation that will always be at war against something or someone because of this war on terrorism.

The term “Blowback,” is a CIA term used to describe unanticipated consequences of unacknowledged actions in other people’s countries. Many of these actions are due to our foreign policy decisions that have been kept secret from the general populations. But as history proves to us, and as Victor Hugo reminds us, no lie can live forever. Blowback is simply another way of saying that a nation reaps what it sows. King warned us about this in his sermon on why he opposed the Vietnam war (that sermon cost him his life). One could argue that the 60’s was a mass demonstration against empire and capitalism running amok. The prophets and the sages of the ages have warned us about karma or “blowback for centuries. It appears that these warnings have fallen on deaf ears---yet again.

As UUs we must come to grips, if we haven’t already that Empire is a direct frontal assault on our 7 principles. We are already known to be religious heretics and I believe rightly so. Yes, we are free thinkers and nonconformists. We choose to think differently about many issues. Yet now, I believe, that if we take our principles seriously, some will consider us enemies of the state. Let me perfectly clear here: we as UUs are in no plot against the State. The State has nothing to fear from us, except the fact that we gather together to create a more fair and just society, a more peaceful world.

But don’t kid yourselves this morning. Holding on to our principles and values, holding on to the audacity to Love, still is, and always will be a revolutionary act, at least to my mind.

There is no divine mandate that makes America the policeman of the entire planet. This attitude is arrogant and untenable. And yet there are no easy answers, as if there ever were.

And so here we stand at this moment in history. Isis, the entire Middle East, the Ukraine, as well as other trouble spots nationally and internationally around the globe may weigh heavy on our collective minds. We all know and have witnessed that the empire can and will strike back. Then our enemies will strike back at us, and we to them, and on and on it goes, this wheel of suffering, this logic of absurdity. I have no answers, and who really knows? Perhaps we are beyond the tipping point.

We are simply humble subjects of the empire witnessing the New World Disorder. Yet one thing is certain; and that is that we can never, and we must never, defer to empire.

Militarism, arrogance of power, materialism and plain old fashion imperialism running rampant through the streets, conflict with our experiment of the democratic structure of government and will distort our basic values and culture. All empires crumple eventually and so we must be vigilant.

In a book entitled, *Jesus and Empire*, Richard Horsley calls to mind a biblical story about the Jewish authorities called The Pharisees, who were attempting to trap Jesus in a treasonous statement. The story is told in the Gospel of Mark 12:17. After much flowery language to hide their deceitfulness, telling Jesus how righteous he was by treating all people equally, the question presented to Jesus was this one: Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not? If he answered yes, he was a collaborator with Roman Imperialism. To answer no was treason. Clever wasn't it?

Rabbi Jesus asked to see a coin, and a coin was handed to him. He looked at the face of Caesar on the coin and asked if it was recognized. The answer was it is the face of the emperor, the image of Caesar. Jesus then answered them saying, "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

This is what we are called to do. If you don't like the word God, replace it with The Spirit of Life, or whatever name you wish. Just remember, we can render to the State that which belongs to the State. But we are Unitarian Universalist. Our inner lives and the way we chose to live it, no Ceasar or empire can take!

Amen and Blessed Be!