

Spiritual Defiance

Building a Beloved Community of Resistance

Robin Meyers

When the invitation arrived to give the 2013–2014 Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale Divinity School, I had personal reasons to be both elated and anxious. My preaching professor Fred Craddock, who died in early March, had given the Beecher Lectures when I was his student at Phillips Graduate Seminary in Enid, Oklahoma. It was 1978. Yale had never invited anyone from Oklahoma to give the Beecher Lectures, but Craddock was already considered the most important voice in homiletics in America, not to mention one of the most admired preachers in the world. He returned from Yale a different person, and went on to influence an entire generation of preachers. When his lectures were published under the title, *Overhearing the Gospel*, the seminary community and the church had a remarkable piece of Craddock’s mind—an insightful treatment of Kierkegaard’s notion of indirect communication as it relates to preaching.

Perhaps the most difficult decision for me, however, was deciding what the topic should be. There is a long tradition that marks the Beecher Lectures as primarily grounded in homiletics. Founded in 1873 in memory of Henry Ward Beecher, (brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe), perhaps the most famous preacher and abolitionist in the 19th century, they began as the Lyman Beecher Lectures on Preaching. But the charter was amended in 1882 to specify “that henceforth the Lyman Beecher lecturer shall be invited to lecture on a branch of pastoral theology or in any other topic appropriate to the work of Christian ministry.”

Any other topic? Perhaps I had more freedom than I imagined. Why not talk about the central preoccupation of my professional life, namely that faith is not about believing, but about *resisting*? Why not name the cause of death

in the church today as caused largely by pseudo-followers of Jesus who are indistinguishable from the dominant culture? Why not make the case that the Bible itself is a manifesto of resistance and that no renewal of the church is possible until the Beloved Community abandons nostalgia and modern purity codes and becomes subversive in its resistance to the forces of death in our time? Here is how I described my choice of subject matter in the prologue:

I wanted to come to New Haven with a particular passion for naming the cause of death in the church. This insight comes not from research so much as from a lifetime spent leading a single congregation in perhaps the most conservative state in the nation. It was here, on the red dirt where I was born, that I watched the last ounce of prophetic courage and relevance disappear from Christian communities of all kinds, obsessed as they are with décor and marketing, but unable to take any risks for the sake of the kingdom.

We mean well, of course. We sing our hearts out. We pray long prayers. But none of it can finally compensate for the fact that as a change agent, we have all but disappeared. Instead of leaven, we are like chameleons for Christ, absorbed into the very dominant culture we are called to critique and resist. In fact, this is precisely the word I cannot get out of my head: resistance. Who thinks of the church any more as a defiant community? Or faith itself as embodied resistance to the principalities and the powers?

Whatever else may be said of the Jesus Movement, it was born in opposition to the status quo. Now it largely sanctifies the status quo. Its founder constituted an unacceptable risk to the Roman Empire, and that resistance seemed so counter-intuitive and subversive that even his mental health was questioned. Perhaps G. K. Chesterton was right when he said that “Christianity is not a faith that has been tried and found wanting, but a faith that has been wanted and never tried . . .

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So let this be the subject of my Beecher Lectures and book: faith as resistance: to ego, to orthodoxy, and last, but not least, to empire. (xiii–xiv, xviii)

Because it is my wife's habit to read poetry aloud to me over coffee in the morning, I discovered a remarkable Polish poet from the Holocaust era, Anna Kamienska. Three of her poems frame each of the three lectures. I used Kierkegaard's notion that illusion is the enemy of both faith and the authentic life to call for resistance to illusion that faith is a performance (ego), that faith is a belief system (orthodoxy) and that faith can peacefully coexist under the shadow of the *pax Americana* (empire). Kierkegaard spoke often in his work of being "undone." Kamienska put it this way: "To fall off a horse/to smear your face with dust/to be blinded/to lift yourself/and allow yourself to be led/like blind Saul/to Damascus."

Ego

How many pastors are failing in churches large and small because they are still riding the horse of ego, still worrying about how popular they are, or whether they can manage to be all things to all people without losing their souls?

Audacity comes easily to most preachers. Not because we are a naturally arrogant lot, or have world-saving delusions of grandeur, but because we are asked to perform an audacious act every Sunday—to stand before our congregations and presume to tell strangers the secrets of their own hearts, even when we have yet to admit to all of our own. They listen politely and patiently, even when we don't know what we are talking about, and a deadly illusion sets in—that we do know what we are talking about. The ego is such a beast. (1–2)

While confessing that it is ironic to lecture on the ego while doing something as ego-gratifying as giving the Beecher Lectures, I identify three well-known types of dysfunctional ministerial egos: the *grandiose*, the *perfectionist*, and the *depressive*. All of us would do well to remember that whether we teach or preach, *the desire for selfdisplay* figured prominently in our choice of a career. Among the deadliest of illusions in the church is that a successful minister is a popular minister, and a popular minister is one who never ruffles feathers. There is, in the end, no smaller package than a person who is all wrapped up in himself. Ego is what both drives and destroys the ministerial personality.

Orthodoxy

Resistance to orthodoxy, however, moves us into deeper water.

It is pleasant sport to joke about the role of the ego in the ministry, or in the academy, or in life itself—but not very dangerous. The narcissist can wreak havoc on any institution, but his dysfunction does not call into question

the institution itself. Resisting orthodoxy, on the other hand, will set off the ancient alarms of heresy. Pushing back against the idea that faith is a set of creeds and doctrines demanding the total agreement of "true believers" will conjure the ancient battles that came to define, and then to fatally compromise, the Beloved Community. . . Resistance is not just about signing on to do battle with some perceived enemy, although the ethos of the warrior and the righteous battle so dominates Western culture that countless Christians today are urged to "stand with God" on every issue (God's position being conveniently identical to their own), and then to do battle with the infidels on the other side in a world of good guys and evil-doers. Anne Lamott reminds us that "you can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do." (41, 43)

Strangely, we still equate "faith" with certainty, and lack of faith with doubt.

We use the word faith to describe an unwavering, unquestioned allegiance to some doctrinal proposition. But certainty is not the flag of faith. Certainty is a symptom of faith's demise. Certainty eliminates the need for faith by replacing it with absoluteness. Churches will often advertise themselves as being in possession of the "answers," but they are profoundly intolerant of certain questions. They promise a place to get "right with God," but that may only mean a place to sign on to a set of particular theological claims that will serve to keep the doubts of a

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“believer” at bay. Doubt is still widely believed to be both a sign of wavering faith and the enemy of truth.

Abraham Joshua Heschel understood doubt to be neither the enemy of faith, nor the root of knowledge. Faith was instead born of wonder, or “radical amazement.” So many religious leaders fear doubt because it would threaten to undo by human reasoning that which has been divinely revealed. They argue that it is arrogant to believe that human reasoning alone can be brought to bear on that which is immutable, and thus trans-rational. But doubt cannot disassemble anything that human reason has not previously assembled, so it is healthy, not dangerous. Heschel writes:

Doubt comes in the wake of knowledge as a state of vacillation between two contrary or contradictory views, as a state in which a belief we had embraced begins to totter. It challenges the mind’s accounts about reality and calls for an examination and verification of that which is deposited in the mind. In other words, the business of doubt is one of auditing the mind’s accounts about reality rather than a concern with reality itself; it deals with the content of perception rather than with perception itself. . . . Doubt, then, is an interdepartmental activity of the mind. (45–46)

If doubt is so important, then why are people warned to view it as a symptom of waning faith? Is it any wonder that church attendance and participation is contracting across almost every category of organized religion?

In all my work there is a subtext, a conviction about what afflicts the church and has dragged it down into a state of almost complete irrelevancy: People no longer feel obligated to attend services on Sunday morning pretending to believe things they know are not true in order to get rewards they doubt are even available. (50)

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Even the language we use to talk about faith is deceptive. We speak of it as if it can be acquired and lost.

This is the language of the common man. Faith development is spoken about as if it is binary. “Once I was a believer, but now I’m not.” Or it is assumed to be a commodity. “Once I had faith, but now I have lost it.” Yet it would be wise to remember that these “beliefs” are primarily, though

not exclusively, claims about Jesus of Nazareth. They are primarily metaphysical claims that constitute reasons why we should worship him, as opposed to warnings about what might happen if we actually followed him. They are also primarily claims made about him by others, not claims that he is reported to have made about himself. They are primarily supernatural claims, meant to justify “believing” in him because he is fundamentally not like you and me (thank goodness), rather than claims about how his teachings, if taken seriously (meaning if practiced and not just recommended), could make teachers, healers, and mystics out of all of us. (51)

How ironic that the historical Jesus is the enemy of orthodoxy, the incarnation of religion as *praxis* turned into a bloodless dispenser of doctrine by an institution more concerned with power than with faithfulness. Remember, at no time does Jesus ever say, “Go and *believe* likewise.”

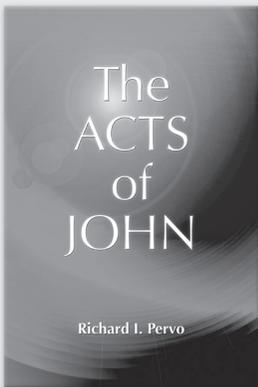
A sign in front of a Lutheran church near my home reads: IT’S ALL ABOUT JESUS. Really? If that’s true, and we are called to follow him, then our faith must be substantially about resistance. His was an imitatio Dei, an imitation of God. He called his disciples to be an imitatio Yeshua, an imitation of Jesus. But nowhere in the synoptic gospels do we find a call to imitatio Theologica, an imitation of beliefs. (56)

The whole of the New Testament can be read as a drama of resistance to conventional religious wisdom. This might just be considered an academic curiosity, except for the fact that so many churches today fear resistance to conventional religion more than they fear death by irrelevancy. So much so that the illusion before us is pure irony: we have become a body of believers that resist the resistance that gave birth to us in the first place. Or to

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put it another way, just imagine that you were to disclaim the birth pangs of your own mother so as to honor her memory through your forgetfulness. (61)

Empire

Resistance to ego and orthodoxy is crucial for the recovery of the Beloved Community. But nothing is more important, or more dangerous, than resistance to Empire. To begin, we have to be willing to use the e-word, admitting that we live in an Empire. But this idea remains repugnant to many, who associate Empire with the *Death Star*.

It is even repugnant to President Obama, who said recently at the United Nations, “The notion of American Empire may be useful propaganda, but it isn’t borne out by America’s current policy.”

I must respectfully disagree, and suggest that the final proof of empire lies in the extent to which we exercise imperial influence—militarily, economically, and culturally. Our methods are not identical to those of Rome, obviously, but the fact is that according to a recent Pentagon report, “the United States has 662 overseas bases in 38 different countries.” By some estimates, we have military personnel in 148 countries.

We wage preemptive war (that is, wars fought to save us from what we think might happen if we don’t wage them), including the 2003 invasion of Iraq to save us from nonexistent weapons of mass destruction. History may record the outcome as having originated in the worst and most duplicitous U.S. foreign policy decision in the modern age. The dominoes were meant to fall toward democracy. Now they are falling toward chaos.

The American empire disposes of leaders who oppose U.S. policies, and we maintain our economic power by guaranteeing our own oil and energy security. We prop up the dictators when we need them, and then destroy them when we don’t. We are the world’s largest exporter of weapons. We are the world’s only superpower, a colossus astride the planet—admired, feared, and deeply resented around the world. (82)

Just as the earliest followers of Jesus saw themselves as self-consciously resisting the ways of Rome, the American church cannot reclaim credibility until it finds similar, and equally risky, ways to resist the *Pax Americana*.

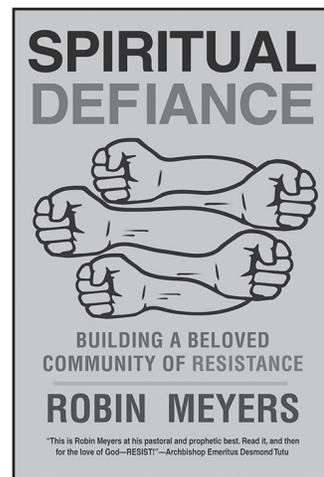
The first Jesus People often met in secret, scratching the sign of the fish on doorposts to mark the spot. Whatever else one might say about modern Christianity, no one describes it as an underground movement. Now we market our location in affluent suburbs with enormous crosses and electronic signs by the highway. Any move by the church today to subvert the dominant culture is met with charges of “socialism” and/or lack of patriotism. . . . So here is my question, plain and simple: What happened to the church that once gave the empire fits, and now fits right in with the empire? (84–85)

The first act of resistance against the Roman Empire was to borrow the language of resurrection reserved for important people and use it to describe the martyrdom of a Jewish peasant. Women probably kept the spirit of Jesus alive by their graveside rituals of mourning, and perhaps provided the model for the Eucharist.

In the gospels, you may have noticed, women move toward the cross; men move away from it. Women do things. Men debate things—often while walking to Emmaus. . . . What began as a quiet rebellion of mourners soon grew into a movement that inspired collective, “embodied” non-compliance with the status quo. Vertical and hierarchical religion was “flattened” by a horizontal and democratic egalitarianism. Women could speak and lead. Half-breeds could find a place at the table. To be a “Gentile lover” was not an insult, but the norm. Tribalism was trumped by joy. All the divisions of human contrivance were swept away, or melted down and poured into the Holy Grail of Everybody-is-Somebody at the Open Table. On the outside, all roads might lead to Rome. But on the inside, there was just one straight highway through the desert. The reign of the unclean God of distributive justice had begun. (87–88)

To resist the American Empire we must first admit that there are in fact many Empires which together comprise

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Community of Resistance*
Robin Meyers

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the *Pax Americana*. As Harvey Cox put it, “We don’t just live in the Empire. The Empire lives in us.”

For example, there is an American entertainment and mass media empire that influences much of the world by its fantastic representation of life as it is not. Nothing is more unreal today than so-called reality programs. There is an American political empire that pretends to be about the “people’s business,” while in reality serving only money and power. There is an American cultural and religious empire that rewards conformity and obedience to a dull and doctrinaire model of what it means to be fully human—which is another way of saying that watching television and going to church can have an equally anesthetizing effect. I remember William Sloane Coffin, Jr., talking about the “flatlining” of the American soul, and how it affected even (or especially) the clergy: “Afraid of sorrows too deep we avoid joys too intense, and we call this emotional mediocrity the ‘good life.’”

It’s true. The empire flattens us, packages us, and numbs us through what George Orwell predicted would be a kind of mental opiate delivered through the omnipresent “telescreen.” Today, Big Brother is the giant flat screen whose blue light oscillates day and night in almost every American home: the television set, the boob tube, with its commercially sponsored electrons humming day and night with scenes and soundtracks of utter nonsense. Nothing is real; everything is for sale; life is reduced to a commodity in what Kierkegaard called “the sickness unto death.”

Just consider, for example, the endless chatter on professional sports talk shows. Grown men sit in studios with sets that look like man-caves for video-gamers, framed by the graphics of Roman Transformers while verbally hyperventilating over trades as if they are talking about the fate of nations. Who will go first in the NBA slave draft (we still buy and sell bodies), and how will it affect

Cleveland’s future, or Miami’s chances, or L.A.’s claim to celebrity fame? Where are the preachers when we need them, to say, “Who really gives a damn about which member of the athletic criminal class gets traded to which owner of the corporate criminal class? Real people in the real world are starving to death.” (93–94)

If American pastors are ever to recover the art of critiquing the Empire they live in without being destroyed by it, they will have to get one thing straight: *No politics from the pulpit* is an impossible demand, since there are no victimless political crimes. There is not a Republican or Democratic God of course. But there is a “politics of the gospel.” It in, the world of Empire is turned upside down.

Pastors must resist everything in the Empire that causes death and indignity in creation. And they must separate themselves from the Empire by making certain that there are no American flags in the sanctuary, that tax-exemption does not make us beholden to those who grant us special favors (like our beloved clergy housing allowance). We must keep the Sabbath again, resisting the notion that we are born to shop and that commerce always trumps rest.

The concluding pages of *Spiritual Defiance* contain a list of things we might resist as followers of Jesus, and I invited those in attendance at Yale to engage in a call-and-response. After each named injustice, I would say, “For the love of God” and the audience would respond, “Resist!” They participated enthusiastically, and I never again will I think of New Englanders as reserved or stuffy.

Ending with the words of Kamienska, I concluded the Beecher Lectures with a call to action:

Lord

You know the weariness of your prophets

You wake them with a jolt of new pain

to place a new desert beneath their feet

to give them a new mouth a new voice

and a new name

May it be so, and may it begin with you and with me.

For if not us, then who?

If not here, then where?

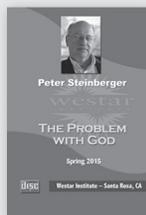
If not now, then when? . . .

Do not turn away. But for the love of God, resist. (124)

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Robin Meyers (Ph.D., University of Oklahoma) is the senior minister of Mayflower Congregational UCC Church of Oklahoma City, Distinguished Professor of Social Justice at Oklahoma City University, an award-winning commentator for National Public Radio, and the best-selling author of several books including *Saving Jesus from the Church* (2009) and *The Underground Church* (2012).

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