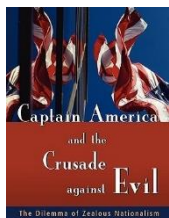


NOTE: The longer version of this shortened review, together with a review of Marci McDonald's book on a similar Canadian reality, may be found on my website here: <https://waynenorthey.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Book-Review-of-Captain-America-and-The-Armageddon.pdf>. There is also much on that website about Christian Nationalism: <https://waynenorthey.com/?s=Christian+Nationalism>.



Book Review of *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism*, Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

This is a first-rate, albeit highly disturbing book. It is also prescient in light of the Trumpocalypse twelve years later, to the south.

Captain America, a comic-book character, they write,

. . . combines explosive strength with perfect moral intuitions. . . he takes on a masked identity and rids the world of evil. [Like] America's sense of mission—and its affinity for violent crusading. This book explains the religious roots and historical development of this crusading tendency (p. xiii).

Unpretentiously stated. The authors deliver masterfully.

The first chapter discusses “The Challenge of a Contradictory Civil Religion.” There is a founding national double-speak conundrum: *peace through war* is core American ethos from The War of Independence onwards. This is fundamental civil religion of the Founding Fathers.

The authors point to the grounding mission vision of the United States:

In its most expansive form, this sense of mission called the nation to nothing less than redeeming the entire world (p. 3).

It combined secular and religious images so that,

In major developments of American life—the Civil War, the settling of the Western frontier, the World Wars, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and the so-called war on terrorism—these ideas have continued to surface (p. 5).

The authors state that there is deep biblical rootedness in two contradictory strands of American culture, evident from the beginning.

The first tradition is what we call *zealous nationalism*. It seeks to redeem the world by destroying enemies (p. 8).

They point out:

The phenomenon of zeal itself provides a fascinating access to the inner workings of our national psyche: the term itself, as we shall see, is the biblical and cultural counterpart of the Islamic term *jihad* (p. 8).

Then,

Alongside *zealous nationalism* runs the tradition of *prophetic realism*. It avoids taking the stances of complete innocence and selflessness. It seeks to redeem the world for coexistence by impartial justice that claims no favoured status for individual nations (p. 8).

The authors acknowledge that these two strands have coexisted in “uneasy wedlock” in earlier times, but in a time of worldwide militant jihad, zealous nationalism, they write, everywhere must be let die.

In Chapter 2, “The Endangered Towers and the Crusade against Jihad,” the writers quote former Republican presidential candidate and Vietnam war hero, Senator John McCain who,

. . . enunciates the cold willingness to kill innocents on the other side of the world—and then to assign the blame to others (p. 12).

They compellingly sketch the parallel paths of Christian/American civil religion *crusade*, and Islamic *jihad*. They agree with author Lee Griffith’s statement on terrorism:

Terrorism is a tactic, whether used by an established government, a revolutionary group, or an individual. The characterization of an action as ‘terrorism’ depends on *what* is done, not on *who* does it (p. 20).¹

In a telling admission, Winston Churchill wrote that the Allied carpet-bombing campaign was a campaign of “terror.” Former U.S. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara in Errol Morris’ *The Fog of War*, admitted that had the Americans lost the War, he and his superior, General Curtis LeMay, would have been rightly indicted for war crimes.

Beyond mere definition of terrorism, we read:

Our contention is that one must also ask *why* terrorist acts are committed. We believe that the answer lies in zealous forms of civil religion whose origins can be traced back to biblical archetypes that are honoured by zealous strands of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—and now influence other movements throughout the world (pp. 21 & 22).

Chapter 3, “Popular Culture as a Bearer of the National Complex” demonstrates that,

When we examine comic books, television programs, films, video games, and other arenas of fantasy experience, we find a competing, powerful center for a symbolic education (p. 27).

They write:

¹ *The War on Terrorism and the Terror of God*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002, p. 18.

These stories popularized Manifest Destiny² and the allegedly selfless imperialism of earlier American civil religion, when seizing other countries surfaced as the nation's mission during the Spanish-American War (pp. 30 & 31).

The authors recount a striking confirmation of an American “*monomyth*” in the White House during the Bush years. Germany's foremost news magazine *Der Spiegel* did a feature article on America's crusade against evil (February 18, 2002). To accompany it, a satirical cover was commissioned depicting Bush as Rambo and his main advisers each in superhero garb. The U.S. ambassador to Germany consequently visited *Der Spiegel's* editorial offices to order thirty-three poster-size covers for the White House!



In moving forward with their analysis, they add ominously:

We shall see that the fascist thinking lurking in the shadow side of the Captain America complex has roots in its religious foundations, and that *these roots have always produced poisonous fruit* (p. 43; emphasis added).

Chapter 4 investigates the concept of America as “A Rod of Iron or a Light to the Nations,” drawing on its self-appropriated biblical roots at its founding as “the Israel of their time” (p. 44).

Ultimately though,

The reliance on a pure form of zealous nationalism proved suicidal [to the ancient Hebrews] (p. 46),

... as, one might add, it invariably does. Over against this, they note the emergence, shortly before the collapse of the Northern Kingdom with the fall of Samaria in 721 BCE, of *prophetic realism*. Now,

In letting herself be purified by defeat, Israel might be able to take up her true national mission of bearing the word of God's impartial justice as the basis for world peace (p. 48).

And again,

Israel's subsequent history reflects the dilemmas posed by these two conflicting versions of mission (p. 48).

The authors explain that,

The clear enunciation of prophetic realism during this final period was set forth by Jesus of Nazareth. At the beginning of his ministry he rejected the dream of bringing the messianic kingdom through violence (Luke 4:5—8). He located evil not in one's foreign or ideological enemy but in the heart of the chosen people itself, exposing the cruelty and callous disregard for life that legalistic self-righteousness had produced (Mark 3:1-6). He reversed the premise of divine favoritism for the

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manifest_destiny

chosen people, suggesting that sinners and foreigners would be the first to be welcomed into God's kingdom (Luke 4:16—30) . . . (p. 52).

This thesis about Jesus challenges two thousand years of biblical interpretation in the writers' claim that not only was Jesus' message unheeded when spoken and he himself was executed,

. . . it was misunderstood and distorted by those who preferred not to hear the truth about themselves.
. . . Jesus' message was interpreted by posterity in the light of Deuteronomy, of Daniel, and, worst of all, the Book of Revelation.

This is disturbing rebuff for the church. Deuteronomy³, Daniel⁴, and Revelation⁵ have too often been interpreted in a zealous nationalist way.

The writers note the transposition of the image of the lamb who in Isaiah is symbol for self-sacrifice, but in Revelation is so ferocious an agent that people cringe in fear. But even here, while the image is intensely violent, the conquering is through nonviolent self-sacrifice. Just as biblical wrath is supremely seen according to prophetic realism as God's covenant love poured out in an agony to woo humanity back to God, or the doctrine of hell is ultimately that place from which God's intention is full liberation, despite humanity's wilful "hell-bentness."⁶ *Objectifying* God's wrath means extremely violent interpretation. "*Subjectifying*" it means ultimate prospect of liberation, the fires of hell experienced in loving embrace (a common Eastern Orthodox theme).

The authors conclude the chapter ominously:

Two opposing images of God, two contradictory versions of national mission, and two different approaches to world mission lie beside each other in uneasy wedlock. To accept their coalescence today is to continue in the dangerous habit of 'doublethink' and 'double-talk.'

Chapter 5 logically follows: "America's Zeal to Redeem the World." This zeal that violence would inaugurate God's kingdom, attended the Puritans from the outset, who expected to establish God's thousand-year kingdom of Revelation 20 immediately. America was the "millennial nation" with consequent cosmic importance. Americans waged the 18th century French and Indian wars in that firm

³ See however Ron Dart's "Deuteronomy, Jewish Prophets and the Sermon on the Mount": http://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2010/05/deuteronomy-jewish-prophets-and-the-sermon-on-the-mount-by-ron-dart.html, last accessed November 9, 2022. He writes:

There are two traditions at work in *Deuteronomy*, and the remainder of the Hebrew canon is torn between which tradition will dominate, when and why. There is the nationalist tradition that legitimates any sort of divine and Jewish behaviour, and there is the prophetic tradition that raises the ethical bar to a higher level. It is in this clash between the nationalist and prophetic traditions within Biblical Judaism that different paths are taken both in the Jewish past and contemporary Jewish life in Israel.

⁴ See however Walter Brueggemann's six-part lecture series: <https://vimeo.com/6879626> (last accessed November 9, 2022).

⁵ See however: *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now*, Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005, for a reading that opposes zealous nationalism in favour of prophetic realism.

⁶ See Bradley Jersak's *Her Gates Will Never Be Shut: Hope, Hell, and the New Jerusalem*, Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009, for such an alternative reading. See as well Kevin Miller's edited volume: *Hellrazed?*, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017.

belief: *peace through violence*. The War of Independence was fought against Britain in similar ideological grip.

Evangelical pietism of the 19th century took on characteristics reprised repeatedly whenever Evangelicals came alive to politics, spilling over into Canada as we can see in journalist Marci McDonald's book: *The Armageddon Factor: The Rise of Christian Nationalism in Canada*, Random House Canada, 2010.

[They] ... believed that a Christian commonwealth could be achieved through the massing of votes of the regenerate to make 'a Christian party in politics.' These voters would elect only converted Christians to office and these legislators in turn would enact and enforce Christian morality throughout the nation....

Great intolerance attended these initiatives. Slavery however for a long time proved intractable to evangelical piety.

And,

Possibly the most ominous expression of this zealous nationalism was the sense of 'Manifest Destiny' by which unscrupulous wars against Mexico and the Native Americans were justified (p. 59).

Slavery became the fulcrum issue during the Civil War to highlight the impossible tensions between zealous nationalism and prophetic realism. Anglo-Saxons, it was believed, carried the highest civilization of humanity. They must therefore spread selflessly their values everywhere: Rudyard Kipling's famous "white man's burden." They write:

This notion of unselfish mission is combined with a powerful sense of cultural and racial superiority that would inevitably lead to imperialistic warfare against the presumed [non-white] enemies of progress (p. 69).

"The Rapturous Rebirth of Millennial Zealotry" is title of Chapter 8, beginning with:

One of the most distressing aspects of the contemporary world is the proliferation of mutually antagonistic apocalyptic movements—Christian, Jewish, Islamic, and Hindu—offering roads to heaven that are paved with the corpses they detest (p. 131).

After almost a century of suspicion regarding the *evil arena of politics*, American Evangelicals embraced "The Moral Majority," a New Christian Right organization founded in 1979 by Baptist minister Jerry Falwell Sr. The impact on American political life far outweighed its relative short lifespan. It transformed the Republican Party,

. . . into a millenarian party resistant to federal authority, hostile to the traditional American politics of compromise, and profoundly suspicious of international law and peacekeeping (p. 141).

The authors believe however that,

It is not zeal itself, but the absolutizing of zeal, which is destructive. Only when the fatal short circuit occurs between human and divine rage does idolatry commence (p. 189).

But zeal is no less essential to the moral life. They suggest human zeal should be bound by the First and Second Commandments enunciated by Jesus.

Chapter 11 looks at “Evil as a Grand Conspiracy.” The authors proceed to contrast this “conspiracy theory” with prophetic realism. In the former, evil originates in the demonic realm, not in humankind, and must be utterly routed and destroyed. In the latter, evil originates in humankind who is personally responsible, and calls for conversion.

They proceed to offer numerous examples in American politics of such a theory, including campaigns against Masons, Irish Catholic immigrants, the south and their slave power conspiracy, the Red Scare after World War I, fear of the rise of Communism in the 1950’s, etc.

What makes the nonsense plausible is simply the conspiracy premise itself. No evidence is required; indeed, none can be provided because everything is really controlled by the mysterious beings ‘at the top.’ (p. 204).

The authors call for a turn to Jesus as *The Grand Debunker* of conspiracy theories.

But most shocking of all, [Jesus] has denoted as demonic not the presumed source of evil in the form of foreign conspiracies but rather the very belief in the theology of the grand conspiracy itself (p. 211)!

They contend that,

Accepting this interpretation of Jesus’ ministry would cut the nerve of conspiracy thought, which ascribes the dominant role in history to the demonic and then takes up demonic methods in the crusade. It would allow people to incorporate Jesus’ realistic assessment of the demonic potential of the religious impulse itself (p. 212).

Chapter 12 investigates “Stereotypes of Good and Evil.”

Radical stereotypes are the logical corollaries of the conspiracy theory (p. 215),

they write. In World War II,

The Japanese were stubbornly reluctant to surrender to ‘demons,’ and the United States proved willing to incinerate Japan’s civilian populations by the hundreds of thousands to bring the war to a conclusion (p. 215).

They consider the rise of stereotypes in biblical history.

That the enemy is not human and therefore deserves annihilation has been one of the most frequently repeated legacies of Daniel and Revelation (p. 221).

They proceed to suggest that the many effects of stereotyping are alarming, explaining:

Due process of law is eroded and the principle of democratic equality.

Chapter 13 considers the question “To Convert Them or Destroy Them.” They wonder why

[violence] remains so appealing—especially to Americans—after centuries of exposure to gospel messages of peace and love (p. 245).

The answer, they aver, lies in a line from comic character Dick Tracy:

Violence is golden when it’s used to put evil down (p. 245),

rendering American violence thereby benign.

They first discuss redemptive violence in the Bible. That violence sets men free is found in the earliest of Israelite tradition, one in which divinity hates violence yet is supreme in violence himself. The authors suggest,

Not until the maturing of prophetic realism was this paradox of divinity rectified, but for American civil religion, the redemptive capacity of righteous violence—in the hands of the right men—still predominates (p. 247).

So destruction and conversion of peoples are overlapping. “*Convert or die!*” the Crusader threatened the Muslim Saracen. “*Convert or go to hell!*” Billy Graham warned in his 20th-century Crusades. It is no surprise that he and all evangelists like him supported the government in every military crusade it undertook. Christian mission in this sense,

. . . is simply an alternate form of warfare (p. 251).

They write:

That the world should be destroyed for the sake of American principles seemed self-evident to most Americans, while those in other countries decided that it might be better to be ‘red than dead.’ (p. 259).

Hosea is used by the writers to critique the mystique of redemptive violence. They claim:

Hosea was the first thinker in world history, so far as we know, to wrestle with this question in something like its modern form (p. 270).

First, the inner wretched decay of the Israelites is exposed. Externalizing evil towards another nation is not the problem. It is *Pogo*:

We have met the enemy, and he is us.

Second, Hosea calls for a repudiation of the zealous myths. He repudiates militarism. *Third*, he connects the popularization of crime and brutality to zealous nationalism. *Fourth*, he connects public zealotry with private murders, etc., in complete imitation of the public injustices committed. *Fifth*, he points to ecological devastation that invariably follows in the wake of zealous crusades. This quite apart from the continued ravages of Agent Orange in Southeast Asian ecosystems that lead to widespread birth defects; and bomblets by the multiplied millions that dismember and kill hapless farmers and others who unknowingly detonate them. *Sixth*, perversions of justice within criminal justice itself begin to mount. There is consequent undermining of respect for law and order. Finally, foreign policy becomes locked into militarization.

Over against this, Hosea posits *redemptive love*, the very essence of Jesus' ministry. We read:

Unconditional acceptance replaced aggression, joy took the place of rage, and a zeal for love overcame the zeal to destroy (p. 271).

The chapter concludes with a call to repudiate the mystique of violence and its policies once and for all . . . just as Hosea demonstrated that these two paths [*redemptive violence* or *redemptive love*] are mutually exclusive—some 2,600 years ago! They write:

It is time for this prophet, whom Judaism, Islam, and Christianity all acknowledge as authoritative, to finally come into his own (p. 272).

The fourteenth chapter is entitled "Neither Humiliation nor Defeat." Deeply embedded in the American psyche, the authors claim, is the need to be right as well as victorious. *They are in fact interdependent*. The authors trace this yen to biblical antecedents. They note a "*Deuteronomic principle*" that understood America needed

to be righteous so as to continue to triumph (p. 276).

The "Vietnam Syndrome" set in with Americans' ignominious withdrawal—after three administrations failed, in fact, *to triumph*.

The authors propose several prophetic realism resources to abet acceptance of defeat as part of the tragedy of life. They also call for a reality dose of Paul's theology of the cross.

They discuss in Chapter 15 "Crusades against Symbolic Desecration." They indicate that

The attempt to use law as the instrument to bestow holiness on the flag has been a leitmotif in much of American history (p. 297).

They draw on biblical motifs to *on the contrary* oppose such a cult of the state.

Their final chapter (16) is a look at “Prophetic Realism in Response to Jihad.” They draw on material from Isaiah that

strikes at the heart of our national ideology: that human liberation is achieved through military power in selfless crusades (p. 315).

Isaiah instead points to

. . . a vision of mutually transforming coexistence between cultures and classes that can be produced by equality under law (p. 317).

They acknowledge the need to address,

. . . what is dark within ourselves. It is not our adversaries alone who must change; it is ourselves (p. 324).

The book concludes with these words:

It [a renewed mission] calls for the transformation of the mythic forms that shape our culture and define the pattern of our politics. It calls for a creative rechanneling of Captain America’s impulse to ‘fight for right’ toward a religious commitment that is shaped both by self-critical questioning and a sense of hope about the possibilities for peace (p. 324).