

## **Theologies in the U.S.A.**

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At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we can point to, at least, four theological models in the United States of North America: neo-conservative theology, liberal theology, the religion of U.S. monopoly capitalism, and prophetic theology.

### Neo-Conservative Theology

Neo-conservative theology is the main form of theology in the U.S.A. today. Its basic theological anthropology is the following: the purpose of an American citizen is to fight for the global supremacy of U.S.A. dominance. The god of neo-conservative theology is the *open face of aggressive U.S. empire*. Or to put it in different words: God has called the U.S. to make the rest of the world into the image of the United States. The rise of neo-conservative theological anthropology has been aided by the fact that the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics no longer exists. Neo-conservatives believe that the United States represents God and the USSR represents Satan. Because the USSR no longer exists, it means that Satan has been defeated by God's kingdom, which is the "American way of life". Neo-conservatives believe that it was their Cold War policy against the USSR that caused its decline. And since their policy was correct, it is their right to now spread their type of theological anthropology globally. This is what is taking place throughout the world. Without the USSR and without cohesive networks of resistance in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> worlds or domestically within the U.S. itself, neo-conservatives argue that just as God made the U.S. in God's image, then the U.S. is going to make the rest of the world in its own image.

Domestically within the United States, the neo-conservative theological anthropology has two major human values. First is the value that states that the U.S as a country is *number one in the world*. It is number one because neo-conservatives claim that no other country can rival the sheer power and strength of the U.S. This feeling of “number one” reveals itself in the military occupation of countries in the Third World. It is also shown in the religious fever displayed at international sports events like the Olympic competitions. To be number one is to have a feeling of absolute supremacy. If any country or non-Americans challenge or disagree with this neo- conservative theology, then they will be totally destroyed.

A second value in the theological anthropology of the neo-conservatives is their belief that not only is the U.S. number one, but it is also the *best country in the world*. If it is the best country globally, then the rest of the world is both secondary and inferior. These two values combine to produce a unique American arrogance in American spirituality. These spiritual values assume that the U.S. is always right; that the U.S. never has to admit a mistake; that when an American wants something done, it should be done immediately; and that the only real rules and ethics are those defined by the U.S. Neo-conservatives also can be generous and show concern for the poor. But if the poor want to determine their own humanity or if another country has a disagreement with the U.S., then the neo-conservative spiritual generosity is withdrawn or it is turned into a spirituality of vengeance.

Finally, neo-conservative theological anthropology argues that each U.S. citizen should make it on their own without help from the government. They also state that those who have wealth are the best examples of how to work hard and make it on their own. These images of a human being have two implications. The government is moving away from providing safety nets for the majority of its citizens. Instead the government is calling for more and more privatization of social services. Second, neo-conservatives are carrying out a major restructuring of the U.S. economy and social policies where wealth is being radically

redistributed upward. Workers are losing benefits. The taxes of ordinary people are being used to give to corporations. The class divide between working people and the wealthy is increasing. Again, the ideal theological anthropology is the small group of wealthy in the U.S. who should be granted increased wealth. Because they are the ideal of what a person should be, their success somehow will trickle down to the majority of U.S. citizens.

Not only is this re-shifting of the U.S. society just on the economic level. It is, in addition, a restructuring on the social level. The gains of people of color (or minority communities), women's rights, lesbian and gay citizens, unions, the environment, regulations against corporate monopolies, freedom of speech (and other bourgeois rights), and more, are all under attack in an open and an aggressive manner.

Neo-conservative theology is a justification for a form of Christianity that does not allow for any type of public discussion that disagrees with it. In this example, Christianity is one official party line. The party line becomes public through the neo-conservatives who control various aspects of government and the media. In fact, when someone does disagree with them, neo-conservatives attack others as being Christian "heretics", or falsely subordinating Christianity to "secularism", or not being "patriotic" because to disagree with neo-conservatism is to disagree with the definition of what it means to be an American citizen. Thus, it is to disagree with the special calling that God has given to the U.S.

### Liberal Theology

The second major theology in the U.S.A. is liberalism. It too has a theological anthropology linked to a conception of god. Its god consists of a return to the foundations of the bourgeois revolution of North America in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In a word, its god is *bourgeois rights*. Here the purpose of an American citizen (that is, what does it mean to be called by the god of bourgeois rights) is to fight against those attacks on individual freedoms: such as individual free speech, assembly, separation of church and state, freedom to worship (as long

as it does not affect the public realm), freedom to debate different ideas in the public, the right to work, women's rights, the rights of minority citizens of different colors, the right to vote, the right to privately own wealth and property, responsibility of the wealthy to those who are suffering, the importance of using reason when there are differences of opinion, and the view that government should represent all the people. We can restate a liberal theological anthropology in the following way: the god of bourgeois rights has called all human beings to come together around a common table and be fair to one another. And part of being fair is to be sensitive to those who are at the bottom of society.

Like the neo-conservative theology, liberal theological anthropology believes that the image of U.S. citizens should be the global model for how people should relate to one another. Liberal theology, furthermore, agrees that the Cold War was necessary and the decline of the U.S.S.R. is evidence that the global model for human beings is the U.S.A. because it is the only super power throughout the world. The difference between neo-conservative theology and liberal theology is around the nature of god and what this god has called human beings to do. What liberal theology wants to spread around the world are bourgeois rights as defined by the United States: individual rights, freedom of religion, the importance of public debates based on who can use reason to persuade others, the right to vote for two bourgeois parties, free trade, U.S. culture, the right to private ownership of wealth and property, etc. The decline of the U.S.S.R. and the rise of one super power has not meant that liberal theology now calls for the U.S. to pull back from the global scene. Nor does liberal theology support different countries in their efforts to pursue their own way forward. Liberal theology is for advancing the god of bourgeois rights, best revealed in the U.S. way of life. This god is the U.S. style of democracy.

Domestically within the United States, liberal theology has a theological anthropology that is inherently a contradiction. On the one hand, humans are called by a higher goal to

pursue bourgeois rights, which means maintaining individual freedoms for all Americans regardless of their class, racial, or gender status. This aspect emphasizes the “rights” part of bourgeois rights. Here we find liberal theology arguing for racial and ethnic minorities, women, labor unions, the environment, etc. On the other hand, humans are called to affirm the bourgeois structures which the U.S. is founded on. This means that liberals affirm the right to private ownership and accumulation and monopolization of wealth and property. Here we find the emphasis on the “bourgeois” part. The ideal theological anthropology for liberal theology is a person who can balance this contradiction so that everyone enjoys a fair and just way of life. Despite the best intentions of liberal theology, it fails to see that the god of bourgeois rights includes an antagonistic contradiction. Bourgeois rights, first of all, maintains a preferential option for the bourgeoisie – those who own the most property and capital in the U.S. Because the majority of people can not attain the ideal status of becoming a bourgeois person (which means they would enjoy the full rights of liberal theology’s god), liberal theology usually supports only reforms for the marginalized, and never questions the god of bourgeois rights itself.

A major spiritual value of liberal theology is that every American (regardless if one is an oppressor or oppressed) has the *right to their own views*. But the god of bourgeois rights has already sided with the bourgeois sectors of U.S. society. It is not a level playing field for all U.S. citizens when it comes to who has the resources to make their views known in the public realm. A second spiritual value is *fairness*. But again we see the contradiction between “bourgeois” and “rights” come to the surface. At first it sounds good that all U.S. citizens are called by the god of bourgeois rights to be fair. Yet, all citizens can enjoy the fairness of their rights as long as these citizens do not threaten bourgeois privileges and the government that supports those privileges. The values of free expression and fairness are not objective; they are ultimately in favor of bourgeois sectors of society.

Because a liberal theological anthropology contains a deep contradiction internal to what it means to be a human, liberal theology can not take a firm stand on fundamental fights. Because it too often takes different positions on the same issue and because of the strong, unified force of neo-conservative theology, liberal theology cannot mount a successful defeat of neo-conservative theology's drive to restructure the entire economy and social arrangements in the U.S.

### The Religion of U. S. Monopoly Capitalism

Both neo-conservative and liberal theologies operate within a larger religious context that liberals and neo-conservatives both support. Specifically, I argue that U.S. monopoly capitalism itself is a religion. The god of this religion is the *concentration of monopoly finance capitalist wealth*. God, in this sense, is not merely a belief in the accumulation of capital for private possession by owners operating inside of one country; that stage is a lower one in the development of capitalism. On the contrary, the god of monopoly finance capitalist wealth embodies the Ultimate Concern where there is a fierce belief in the intense concentration, in a few hands, of finance capitalism on the world stage. It is an extreme expression of the private ownership and control of capital in various forms of wealth spurred on by the rapid movement of finance and capital on a global scale. Monopoly wealth is a power in its own right that makes its adherents bow down to it and pursue any means necessary to obtain it. All who believe in it are possessed by it; it is the final goal above all else.

Like all religions, the religion of U.S. monopoly capitalism advances a theological anthropology. (Theological anthropology defines and regulates what it means to be a human being in a religious system.) What does a god require of human beings in order for them to be human? Such a human being is one who has the most concentrated financial wealth accumulation on a global scale. Ideally, since religions have an inclination for utopia, a small

group would control the world's capital. Here capital includes both the majority of the human population – real people – and the ecology – the earth's natural and human-made resources. In the future utopia on earth, all social relations among human beings will be defined by the god of concentrated wealth. In other words, to be a human being is to fit on an unequal scale of wealth ownership. Wealth redistribution goes upward into the possession of a small group of citizens.

In contrast, theological anthropology for the majority of the world suggests another reality of what it means to be human in the religion of U.S. monopoly capitalism. Prior to the arrival of this religion, especially in Third World indigenous communities, human beings were valued for who they were as members of the human race created by some divine power. Now this global religion re-baptizes them into a new man and woman, where the measure of worth becomes what one consumes. The U.S. global religion forges new tastes and sensibilities throughout the world while it attempts to manufacture one transcendent culture--the culture of market consumption. A true human being becomes one who actually possesses commodities or one whose goal in life is to do so. Despite the fact that the vast majority of Third World peoples live in poverty, the religion of U.S. monopoly capitalism attempts to transform them into adherents of the faith by inducing in them a desire to perceive themselves as owning the products from the developed capitalist world. This fact touches the core issue of the new religion, which wants people not only to purchase products but to reconceive of themselves as people. To change into something new, various groups must, besides redirecting their purchasing habits, re-feel who they are in the present and re-envision their possibilities for the future. Communities are baptized into a lifestyle to fulfill the desire for commodities and to follow further the commodification of desires.

Globalization pursues relentlessly this refashioning of the new man and woman throughout the globe. It seeks a homogenized monoculture of the market to bring about the

transformation of people who are valued in themselves to people who are determined by their dependency on commodities. A world culture producing one definition of what it means to be a human being is predicated on serving the market.

The spreading of different values is closely linked to theological anthropology. As one redefines oneself, by accepting the new religion's re-creation of the human person, one internalizes values appropriate to the new man or woman. The point of the religion of U.S. monopoly capitalism is to craft new values to accompany the new person. First is the value of individualism. If monopoly finance capitalist wealth is to succeed as the new god throughout the earth, it has to erase the idea, particularly in Third World indigenous cultures, that the individual is linked to, defined by, accountable to, and responsible for his or her family and extended family. A sense of communalism and sacrifice of individual gain for the sake of a larger community stands in stark contradiction to the new religion of U.S. monopoly capitalism. Once an individual converts to the new religion and reorients his or her self-worth and feeling of worthiness to a mode of individual gain, regardless of the well-being of those around him or her, this person has successfully undergone the rite of confirmation into the new religion and has accepted faith in the new god as a personal lord and savior. The value of individualism (e.g., individual gain by any means necessary) is central to the god of monopoly finance capitalism.

Individualism opens up the additional value of accumulation of things for the individual's primary benefit. In other words, gaining and amassing personal possession as a means of acquiring more personal possessions flows from a focus on the self for the self. This acquisitive desire manifests itself in diverse ways. It downplays sharing. It weakens the art of negotiation and compromise. It blinds a vision of mutuality. And it fosters a utilitarian way of being in the world where people, places, and things become tools for and stepping-stones toward increased personal profit.

## Prophetic Theology

The final model of theologies in the U.S. is prophetic theology. Absent sustained, massive movements on the part of ordinary people, prophetic theology is hard to observe. Yet there are pockets of prophetic theology on the local level. Prophetic theology conceives of God as liberation toward the practice of freedom. Therefore theological anthropology understands itself to be called by God to work in liberation struggles in order to produce freedom, especially for the poor, working people, the brokenhearted, and the marginalized. Prophetic theology works for a holistic liberation and freedom – where the wounded spirituality of the individual is transformed at the same time that demonic social structures are radically altered.

And prophetic theology organizes on several levels simultaneously and not sequentially. It is concerned about the liberation of and practice of freedom of working people, races and ethnic groups, women, lesbians and gays, and the ecology. Because the eventual practice of freedom means each individual person having a healed spirit while participating in new social structures defined as a common wealth, then prophetic theology struggles for spiritual and material freedom.

In the academic arena, we see prophetic theology being taught by U.S. minorities of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), white feminists, and a very small group of professors developing a white theology of liberation.

On the church level, a small progressive group of churches are practicing a prophetic theological anthropology – they preach an holistic gospel of individual spiritual change and structural change. Prophetic theology, as a larger movement, is manifested in the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference. This conference is a national network of the most progressive wing of the African American churches. Each year it brings together pastors, lay leaders, seminary students, and professors, men and women, to discuss the theology and practice of

justice, freedom, ethics, and politics relative to personal liberation and domestic and international issues. It defines personal salvation as a process linked to the well being of community. Furthermore, these black religious gatherings are very concerned about the survival and self-determination of Third World countries. In fact, the Proctor Conference was initiated and sustained by the leadership of prophetic African American pastors across the U.S. Various congregations within this national network have ministries dealing with working people, the poor, racial and ethnic communities, the ecology, and women. Some have ventured out to heal the brokenhearted among black gay and lesbian Christians. Moreover, they are actively making connections with liberation theologians worldwide. Though small, it is with prophetic theology, especially where it continues to root itself among working people, where a better world is possible.

Although the one world super power has advanced its demonic dimensions of globalization, empire is both most dangerous and most vulnerable when it allows no dissent. When the dragon removes even the pretense of bourgeois rights and international cooperation, it is approaching the end of its rule. For, if it could rule its own people and the rest of the globe with a smile, then it would be at its strongest point. Only when it is wounded and losing its grip on exploited peoples and oppressed nations will it resort to open, brute intimidation both abroad and at home. But human history and God's role in human history have shown that ultimately it is the peoples' struggles that yield a new social configuration where the human person becomes the defining criterion of healthy social relations and a spirituality of compassion and global friendship. Now is the opportune time to intensify the work toward justice and build even stronger international bonds among prophetic theologies of all kinds. Even in the midst of storm clouds in the midnight hour, we know that joy will come in the morning. The Lord will make a way out of no way.