

# Reverend Jeremiah Wright: Religious Freedom Versus State Religion, Ethics, Politics and Strategy

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## Introduction

The sustained vituperative attack and the feeble apologetic defense of Reverend Wright's brilliant, eloquent and substantive sermon in defense of human dignity speaks to the basic ethical, political and strategic issues of our epoch. For Reverend Wright was not merely 'commenting' on an ethical omission of our day but raising fundamental principles about the behavior of states, the role of individual conscience in the face of crimes against humanity and the need to give name and take action in the face of evil. The entire spectrum of politicians, the mass media and, in particular, the political parties and two (and a half) of the presidential candidates raise, by their hostile reaction and the substance of their criticism, vital issues of the relation between the State and Religion.

"They know what they say", (to paraphrase and re-state Jesus Christ's comments on his persecutors) applies with a vengeance to the barrage of mindless screeds which were intentionally launched against the Reverend's brilliant analysis and dissection of the immoral means in pursuit of the great crimes of our epoch. Of course, the verbal assault of Reverend Wright was directed explicitly to discredit and disqualify Democratic Presidential candidate, Senator Barak Obama, a long time member of Wright's United Church of Christ Chicago parish. Many were, and continue to be, vile accusations charging that his sermon was 'incendiary', 'anti-American', 'racist' and 'politically extremist'. Phrases critical of US empire-building were dubbed the "God Damn America" sermon. Moral condemnations of 'war and money' were decontextualized to accuse Reverend Wright of being 'a man of hate', 'a hate monger' and a 'racist extremist'. The insults and verbal assassins came from both liberal and conservative politicians, writers, mass media pundits and commentators.

Barak Obama's 'defense' of Wright was based on separating the benign and respected avuncular 'person' (or personality) of the Reverend from his brilliant, substantive, historical analysis, political diagnosis and profoundly ethical moral judgment. By defending the messenger but condemning the profound message, Obama ultimately sided with the political defenders and apologists of a brutal, militaristic, imperial order, thus enabling him to continue his electoral campaign.

## Key Theoretical and Analytical Insights

Wright's speech is informed by four profound theoretical and conceptual insights:

First, Wright's central idea is that repeated large-scale, long-term offensive imperial wars and military actions lead to military reactions or counter-attacks on US property and lives, military and civilian, outside and inside the United States. Given the authoritarian

political environment and the hostile mass media, Wright cites the utterances of a former US Ambassador and long-time member of the State Department Establishment, Edward Peck to corroborate his observation. Contrary to the pro-empire political scientists who predominate in the prestigious Ivy League universities, and ignore the historical framework of critical readings of empire building, Wright's theoretical argument is grounded in a wealth of historical experiences, which he enumerates to reinforce his central point. His theoretical argument is woven around the 9/11 Muslim-Arab attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. He cites the colonial and post-colonial savaging of the Middle East, including the military attacks and economic boycott of Iraq, the bombing of Sudan, the US support of state terrorist regimes and the Israeli destruction of Palestinian and Lebanese lives. Imperial action and anti-imperial re-action – Wright algebraic formulation refutes the Ivy League professors' propagandistic arguments, which extrapolate the violence of the anti-imperial reaction from its preceding bloody imperial historical framework in order to present the subsequent imperialist action as a defensive response.

Wright's theoretical-historical correction of the false premises of orthodox academics and mainstream politicians regarding the source of violence in the international system lays the groundwork for a detailed commentary and moral judgment of the principal conflicts of our time.

By bringing to the fore a succinct enumeration of the sequence of US violent military actions from the violent seizure of Indian lands to the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima, to the colonial wars in Africa to the invasion of Panama and the bombing of Grenada, Wright establishes the historical basis for his judgment that the driving force of US foreign policy is 'militarism and money'. His critics, unable or unwilling to challenge his historical narrative, resort to ad hominem attacks, relying on labeling techniques, attributing to him a 'strident' style or 'incendiary language'.

Secondly, Wright provides a socio-psychological framework for understanding contemporary elite-manipulated and motivated mass violent sentiment in the aftermath of 9/11 and the initial general embrace of a military response.

Wright sets out a three-stage sequence of socio-psychological 'feelings': (1) reverence for the sites attacked and sorrow for the victims, (2) revenge against a general 'other' (to be designated by the imperial rulers), (3) hatred and war against enemies and unarmed innocents alike. Drawing on historical analogies with the biblical account (Psalm 137, all nine verses) of the Israelite reverence of the Temple (of Jerusalem), its destruction (by Chaldeans) and their subsequent return and revenge (slaughter and eviction of all non-Israelite inhabitants), Wright draws a parallel with the US reverence for 'money', symbolized by the World Trade Center, and 'military' (the Pentagon); their thirst for 'revenge' rooted in the 'feelings' of pain, sorrow, anger, outrage, destruction and senseless carnage' this leads, he reasons, to hatred and demands to attack and punish 'someone' ('pay back'). In our time this means killing armed adversaries and unarmed civilians – Afghanistan and Iraq, soldiers and civilians. Wright brilliantly elucidates the emotional and political link between 'worship' (over losses) and 'war', presumably to restore the 'revered sites' of money (financial credibility) and military power (imperial credibility).

Wright's socio-psychological framework allows us to understand the way in which the Bush Administration blended mass objects of veneration (loss of human lives) with the sacred sites of the elite (Wall Street and the Pentagon) into a powerful engine of

war. Interestingly, Wright's citation of the biblical account of Israeli indiscriminate revenge (*'happy is he who dashes their infants against the rocks' Psalm 137*) parallels the policies and practices pursued by the contemporary American Israelite policy makers in the Pentagon who pursued policies of total destruction and dismemberment of Iraq. Though Wright does not specifically refer to this parallelism, it springs to mind when he refers to the current injustices, and his specific mention of Israeli oppression of the Palestinians as part of the global injustices.

Thirdly, Reverend Wright links his 'practical' historical and theoretical analysis to a set of moral judgments and policy prescriptions. The wars of the last 500 years have economic and racial dimensions ('riches and color') pitting rich white elites against poor people of color. Imperial violence begets oppressed violence; state terror based on superior arms begets individuals willing to sacrifice their lives in terrorist responses. Confronted with these historical and social conditions, he counsels the American people (not just his black parishioners) to engage in 'self-reflection'. By emphasizing and giving priority to 'self' reflection he wants to undermine the effort of the political elites to focus mass attention on the asserted faults of 'other people', the target of military assaults. Wright emphasizes the need to create primary (family) and secondary (community) solidarity and affection (love) as opposed to bonding with the war-making elite. By emphasizing reflection, Wright is openly rejecting blind adherence to the elite and belief in their lies for war.

From the Socratic logic of critical self-reflection ('know yourself') and solidarity, Wright envisions a time for 'social transformation'. Armed with a social awareness of the historical and present record of elite-driven imperial wars, Wright postulates the need for fundamental structural changes, *"...in the way we have been doing things as a society, a country, as an arrogant superpower. We cannot keep messing other countries"*. In other words Wright links changes in inner individual spiritual and social consciousness with collective social and political action directed at a fundamental transformation of the social structure and economic and political system, which make us an *'arrogant superpower'*.

In his own words, Wright wants to convince the American people to transform imperial military wars into internal political wars against racist and class injustices. He proposes a fundamental redistribution of wealth through reallocation of the public budget. Citing the *"\$1.3 trillion dollar tax gift to the rich"*, he counters with a policy proposal to fund universal health care and the reconstruction of the educational system to serve the poor.

Reverend Wright, in speaking to the American people, not only condemns human catastrophes inflicted on working people at home and abroad by the 'arrogant superpower' empire-builders, but points to the great historical opportunities for changes. His is not a message of other worldly spiritual salvation; it is a call to action here and now. His is not a superficial critique of individual misbehavior or 'failed policies' (as his former parishioner, Obama would have it) but a deep structural analysis of systemic failure which demands a 'social transformation, which goes to the root of the present day policies of imperial wars and state and individual terrorism.

## Conclusion

The reason for the repeated vicious personal attacks on Reverend Wright by the mass media and the political leaders and academic apologists for empire building is abundantly clear – to prevent a powerful, reasonable, logical and relevant analysis from influencing the American public or even exercising any influence on the Presidential campaign.

Equally important the political and media attacks on Reverend Wright are meant to destroy freedom of conscience, the separation of Church and State. What the critics want, is a religion and religious figures at the service of the state, which blesses war planners, honors war criminals, arouses mass hatred of state-designated target peoples. The 'arrogant superpower' honors the ministers, priests and rabbis who follow state policy spewing hatred against Arabs and Muslims. Nothing more and nothing less, Reverend Wright is standing in word and deed for the freedom and autonomy of individuals and institutions against the voracious spread of totalitarian state power.

Clearly the irrational vituperative, sustained attack on Reverend Wright is more than a reactionary political electoral ploy in a racist electoral campaign; it is a fundamental attack on our democratic freedoms and the autonomy of our religious institutions.

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