

2nd Opinion: Do you worship a wind-up Jesus?

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The week before Christmas, I received a small package from minister-friends in eastern North Carolina. It contained a sage-looking, plastic action figure pictured above. The enclosed card read: "A gift for you from two wise men in the East. Maybe you can be the third! Warmest wishes and Christmas blessings to you."



Bill Leonard But theological trifles, like all theology, can have multiple readings. Our daughter-theologian, Stephanie Leonard, took one look and inquired, "Who sent us the wind-up Jesus?" Here endeth the lesson, at least for me, as turbulent 2016 shuts down and 2017 begins.

A wind-up Jesus?! That impertinent image captures my continuing concern that the Jesus I claim is merely a cut-and-paste Christ of my own creation, more in my image than that of the Galilean peasant who stalks the first century underclasses with grace while re-forming orthodoxy so blatantly that its protectors see Golgotha as their only recourse. Is my spirituality predicated on my own rather sullied answers to the old question, "What would Jesus do"?

Sadly, wind-up saviors punctuate much of Christian history. A wind-up Jesus sanctified the Inquisition to deal with heresy; justified anti-Semitic pogroms against the "Christ killer" Jews; validated chattel slavery; and got

Mary Dyer hanged for preaching Quakerism in Puritan Boston. A wind-up Christology is the bane of liberal and conservative alike.

“Negation of Jesus”

In *Brother to a Dragonfly*, the curmudgeonly prophet (Aren't all prophets curmudgeonly?) Will Campbell describes his “conversion” from a left-of-center wind-up to a radical Jesus, confessing that during his first 20 years as a minister, he unknowingly had succumbed to “a ministry of liberal sophistication” that became “an attempted negation of Jesus, of human engineering, of riding the coattails of Caesar, of paying in his (Caesar's) ballpark, by his rules and with his ball, of looking to government to make and verify and authenticate our morality, of worshipping at the shrine of enlightenment and academia, of making an idol of the Supreme Court, a theology of law and order and of denying not only the faith I professed to hold but my history and my people”

That dramatic realization came, Campbell recalled, in 1965 after “special deputy” Thomas Coleman murdered in cold blood Jonathan Daniels, civil rights worker, Episcopal seminarian and Campbell friend in Hayneville, Ala. In the trauma of that moment, Will was compelled to acknowledge the Alabama-born racist was not an “other,” but, like Will, a “bastard” for whom Christ died.

Easy grace won't hold

Coleman's racist evil lurked in many a Southern heart, and only Christ's revolutionary grace would suffice. Such grace forced Campbell into a “process of coming to terms with one's own history, whatever that history might be.” The easy grace of his liberal, wind-up Jesus simply would not hold.

Nor will it hold for the 81 percent of evangelicals who voted for Donald Trump, not because of the way they voted, but because they sold out their

professed convictions for a mess of political pottage. This coalition of conservative Christians who vote Republican took shape in the late 20th century with groups like the Moral Majority and Religious Roundtable, and with evangelical concerns that liberal churches, secularists and the Supreme Court were undermining “Judeo-Christian” values in American spiritual and moral life. Many represented their movement as a moral arbiter of biblical non-negotiables regarding sexuality, male/female roles, marriage, divorce, child-bearing and doctrinal orthodoxy.

That moral high ground crumbled with evangelicals voting for Trump, renegotiating supposedly binding ethical standards at the drop of his red cap. Politically, that was their right. Evangelically, they caved; conforming to the same culture-compromise they condemned; defending their ethical sell-out with shabby biblical proof-texts. Trump’s callous response to “the least of these,” his blatantly exploitation of women and his shallow apology for despicable “locker room banter,” apparently produced no serious moral repercussions among certain evangelical voters.

Evangelical sellout

These evangelicals lost credibility, not because they helped elect the new president, but because they violated their own inviolable dogmas, tenets they apply unsparingly to the rest of us. By letting Trump off the gospel hook, they forfeited their claim to instruct sinful Americans on moral and spiritual matters. The great evangelical sellout is personified in Franklin Graham’s rhetorical tweet, “Do you think the Russians interfered with the outcome of the U.S. election, or was it God?” Then he answered himself: “I believe it was God.”

I confess I am by political sentiments a Democrat, Texas born and bred into one, when that was actually possible, but I’ll be damned (speaking theologically) if I’ll attribute any election in the USA as negotiated by the God who sent Jesus into the world.

When Trump goes bad in some way or another like every president from slaveholding-Washington to Syria-evading Obama, I don't want God to have to take the blame. But I must hope that public officials, from president to police chief, do justice and love mercy—whatever God they claim or disavow.

And I'll keep wandering toward that same Jesus who "endured the cross, despising the shame"—the Word made flesh, who will resist our tawdry manipulations even unto the end of the age.

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