News
Spirituality



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As election day approaches, we are once again flooded with political ads for the opposing candidates. As it gets later in the season, the ads get more negative,

disgracefully vicious and dishonest — unfortunately a successful tactic in American politics now. Quite often in recent years, these attacks have taken the form of denying the opponent's love and respect for the exceptionalism of the U.S. among the nations of the world. Even as recently as 2016, it was dangerous political heresy not to claim that the nation is best and blessed, divinely chosen to lead the world.

This often unquestioned attitude assumes some form of this narrative of origins: People fleeing religious persecution came to the New World seeking freedom to live their faith. As they did so, they were blessed by God, multiplied and spread across the continent, and the nation became a "shining light on the hill," bearing witness in the world to the priority of Christian faith and values.

The main problem, of course, is that this narrative is a fable that glosses over and hides the original sins at the foundation of the U.S. as we know it today: genocide of the indigenous peoples from whom the land was taken, slavery of African peoples by whose labor so much of its wealth and power were built, and thoughtless, greedy domination and degradation of the land and resources that have led over time to the economic and ecological crises we face today.

It may be that the bizarrely vicious tribal politics of the current political era, so erratically and manipulatively related to "truth" and dismissive of visions of human rights and the common good, is simply, among some political leaders, a refusal to continue the charade, the "political correctness" of that sanitized myth of national origins. If so, it is a shameless public display of the driving spirits flowing from those original sins so long hidden beneath the ideological and self-righteous claims to American exceptionalism, a blunt assertion that wealth and might make right. Period.

In 2014, shortly before the worst of our current political attitudes and practices had emerged, the longtime brilliant and wisely pastoral biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann attempted, through his biblical scholarship, to call the nation to the conversion being offered us and to point out a path of urgent prophetic renewal.

His book, *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks* (Eerdmans, 2014) describes how ancient Israel lived by its false belief in its exceptionalism. Confusing the unconditional covenant commitment of God to Abraham with the conditional covenant commitment of God to Israel on Sinai, the leaders of Israel promoted and acted on the belief that God would protect the nation from all its enemies no matter

how faithful or unfaithful it was to the demands of the Mosaic covenant. The exceptional commitment of God to Israel, it was assumed, would stand firm in the face of all enemies and difficulties "forever and ever."

That false ideology, Brueggemann documents, was shattered by the Babylonian conquest, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian Exile of its leaders. They were forced to face the reality of their infidelity and to discover in their suffering God's judgment, punishment, and call to conversion.

Brueggemann's thesis here is that the attacks of 9/11 in the U.S. provided the kind of shock experience for the nation that the Babylonian conquest and exile did for Israel. It had the kind of impact that could break through our ideology of exceptionalism and start us as a nation down the path of conversion required by the underlying sinfulness of our national identity, history and culture. He suggests that that journey of conversion can find guidance and hope from the response and spiritual evolution of Israel.

Drawing on the Hebrew scriptures that emerged in the periods following the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem, he shows how, over time and through the harsh experience of the Exile, Israel had to face the reality of its false ideology of exceptionalism, give expression to its grief and loss until finally hope could resurface with a new prophetic vision of Israel's relationship with God and its future.

As always, Brueggemann's writing is clear, pastorally insightful and socially brilliant biblical discernment for Christian churches in our times. Sadly, though, as a nation we seem to be slipping further and further from the true reality he is calling to our attention, from any willingness to face it and open ourselves to conversion and change.

Looking back from this 2018 vantage point at what has gone on since 9/11, it is painfully clear that 9/11 alone did not accomplish the breakthrough that is needed. In the few years since, the financial collapse of 2008, the interminable wars in the Middle East, the election of Donald Trump, the emergence of a Hobbesian/Trumpian political culture, and the removal of the U.S. from its positions of global leadership and influence have all joined the attacks of 9/11 as shocking experiences seemingly capable of calling the nation to conversion. But they too are failing.

How much suffering will it take? How long will it take until we as a nation will seriously engage upon the path of conversion and faithful recommitment to embracing reality, including our reality as a nation rife with corruption, oppression and self-centered values; to expressing our grief as a nation for the destructive sins so deep in our history, culture and psyche; and to praying for the prophetic emergence of hope, hope for and dedication to building a New Creation?

Buy, read, pray, preach and share this book. I have enough trust in the decency of the American public to believe that the vicious tribalism of our politics now will again recede and we will at least return to professing belief in decency, justice and human rights. This book can help us, when that day comes, to never again let our nation fall unconscious (or conscious) victim to the dishonest and destructive myth of exceptionalism so often used manipulatively in political processes and seasons.

More importantly, even now it can alert us that we all need to be part of helping the nation move forward through the processes of conversion to which God is calling us for the wellbeing of the human family and the planet itself. There's no time to waste.

[Jesuit Fr. James E. Hug serves as sacramental minister for the Adrian Dominican Sisters and writes on spirituality for social transformation. His blog, "Truth that does Justice," can be found on the website for the Dominican Center: Spirituality for Mission.]

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