

Christian Theologies of Power and Resistance

Session 3: Can we move past Christendom?

Matthew D. Taylor

For Our Interactive Portions or to Ask Questions

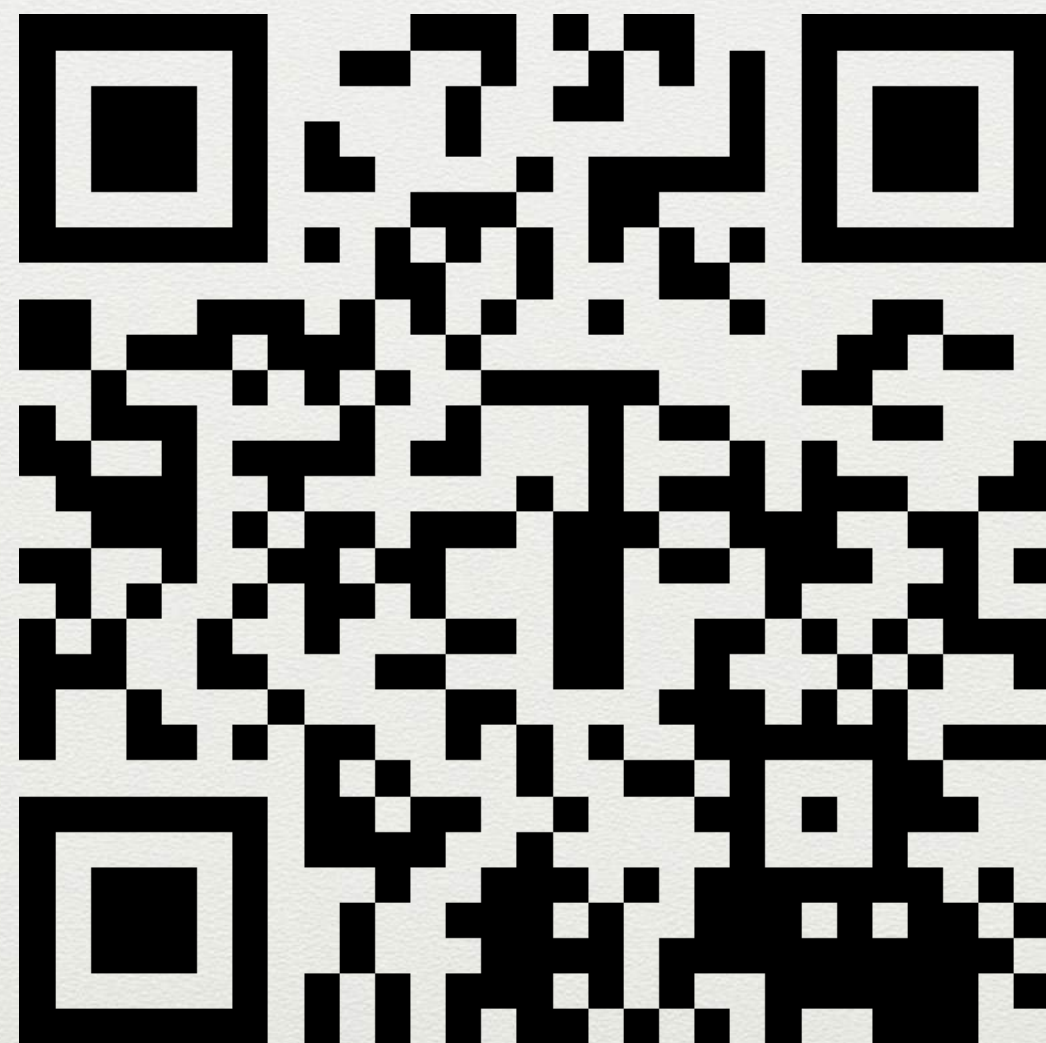
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Review from Sessions 1 & 2

Religious Studies

Religious traditions (like Christianity) contain multitudes and are multivocal.

The same source texts and traditions that can bolster abusive Christian imperialism and supremacy can also provide inspiration to Christian resistance movements and the pursuit of justice and equality.

vs.



Religious Studies

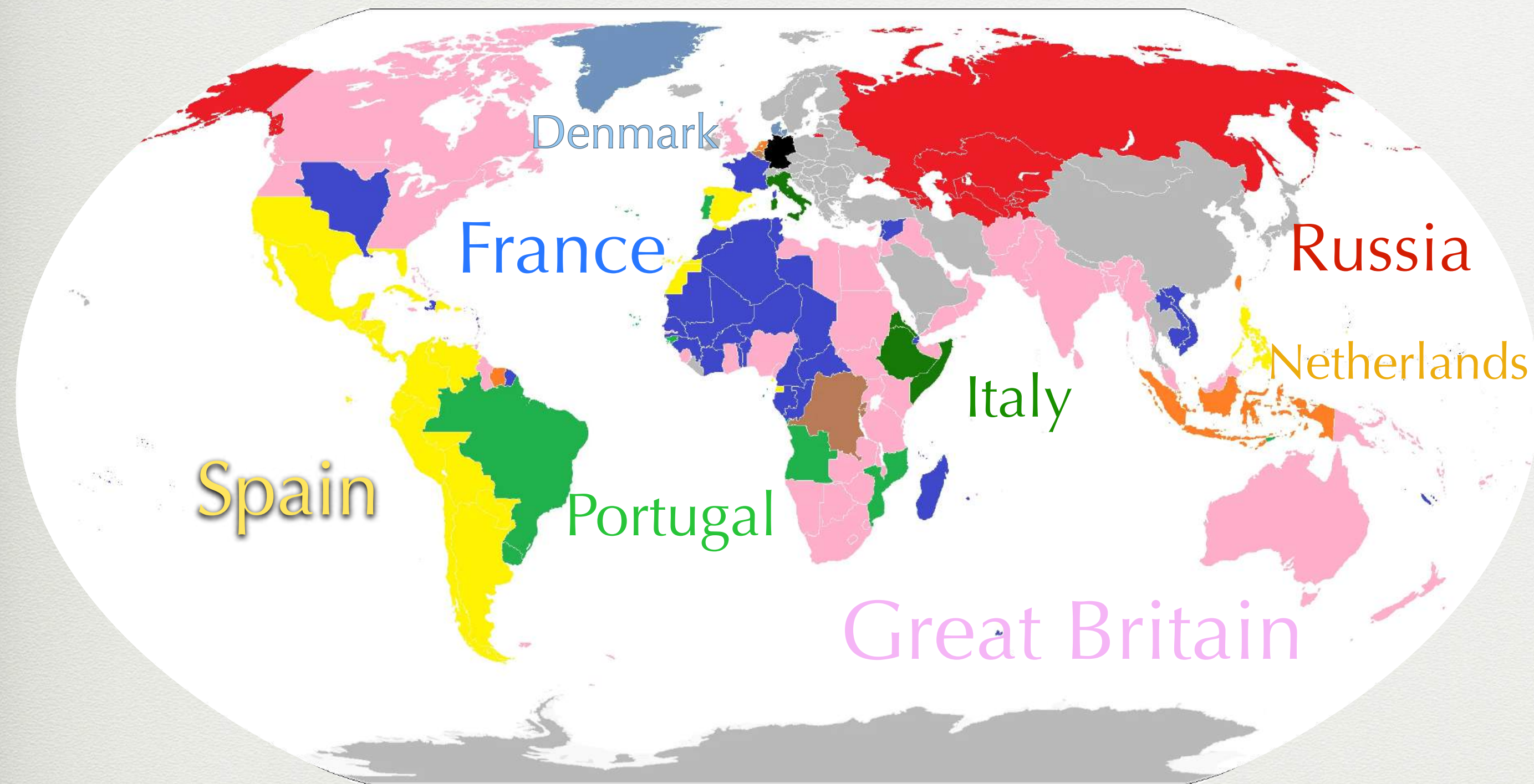
Theology

Jesus and the early church lived a disempowered, colonized existence and many in the early church had a radical anti-imperial vision of the equalizing kingdom of God.

But as Christians have gained political and cultural power, they have frequently distorted Jesus's teaching and developed theologies to justify domination, greed, and other behaviors that were antithetical to

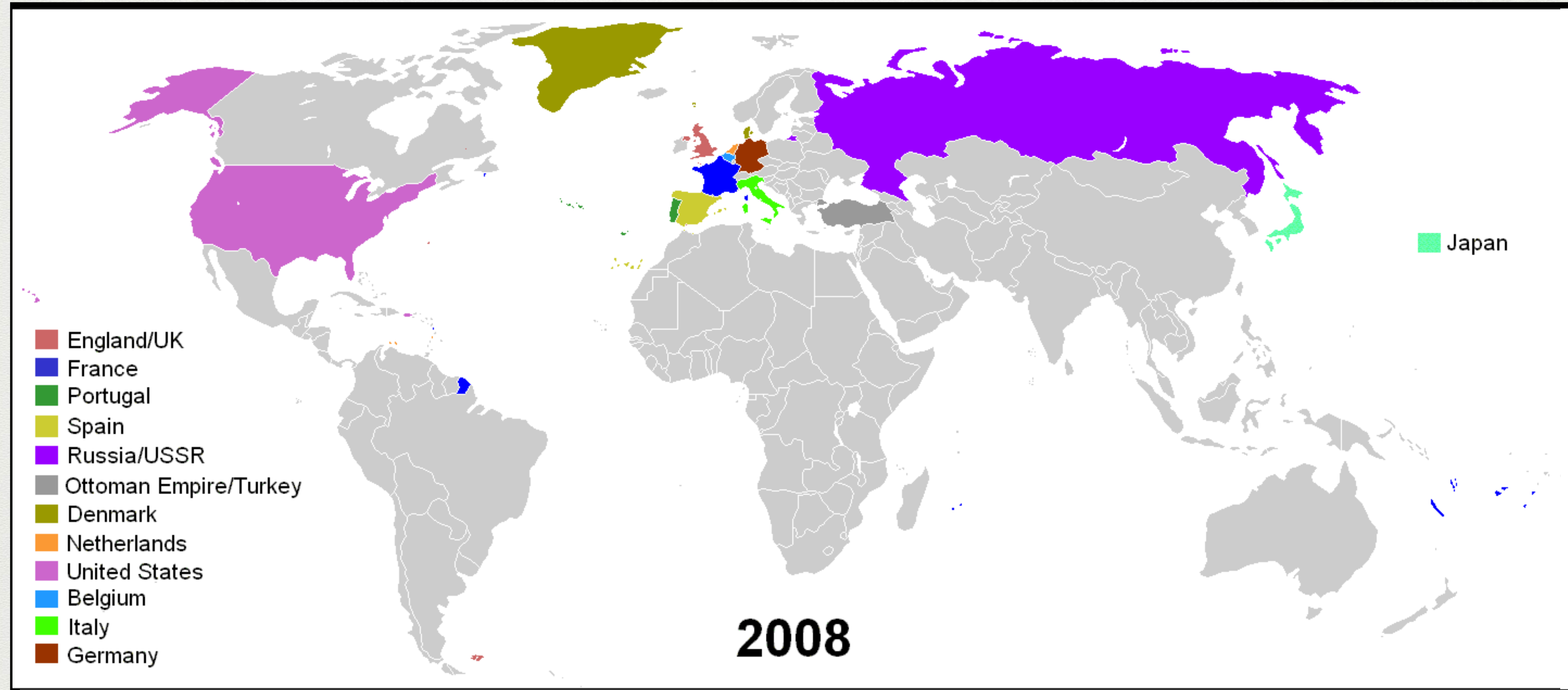
How European Colonialism Dissolved

- A convergence of factors in the early 20th century:



- Anti-colonial independence movements within the colonies made maintaining quasi-empires more costly.
- World War I & II devastated Europe and moved nations and governments to focus on domestic affairs.
- The emergence of the United Nations (1945) put pressure on colonizing powers to allow independence.
- The international order shifted into the Cold War, with two superpowers (the US and USSR) competing to build their spheres of influence.

The Process of Decolonization



How Christendom (sorta) Came to an End

The Protestant Reformation wars shatter hopes for a united Christendom

Biblical interpretation is up for grabs, and all kinds of new political theologies emerge

*Theology -
history of ideas*

The Peace of Westphalia disrupts existing empires & devolves power over religion to nation-states

The Enlightenment challenges traditional beliefs & proposes a form of secularism (i.e., sep. church & state) which many Christians adopt

Industrialization (and urbanization) restructures social conventions and leads to new community formations

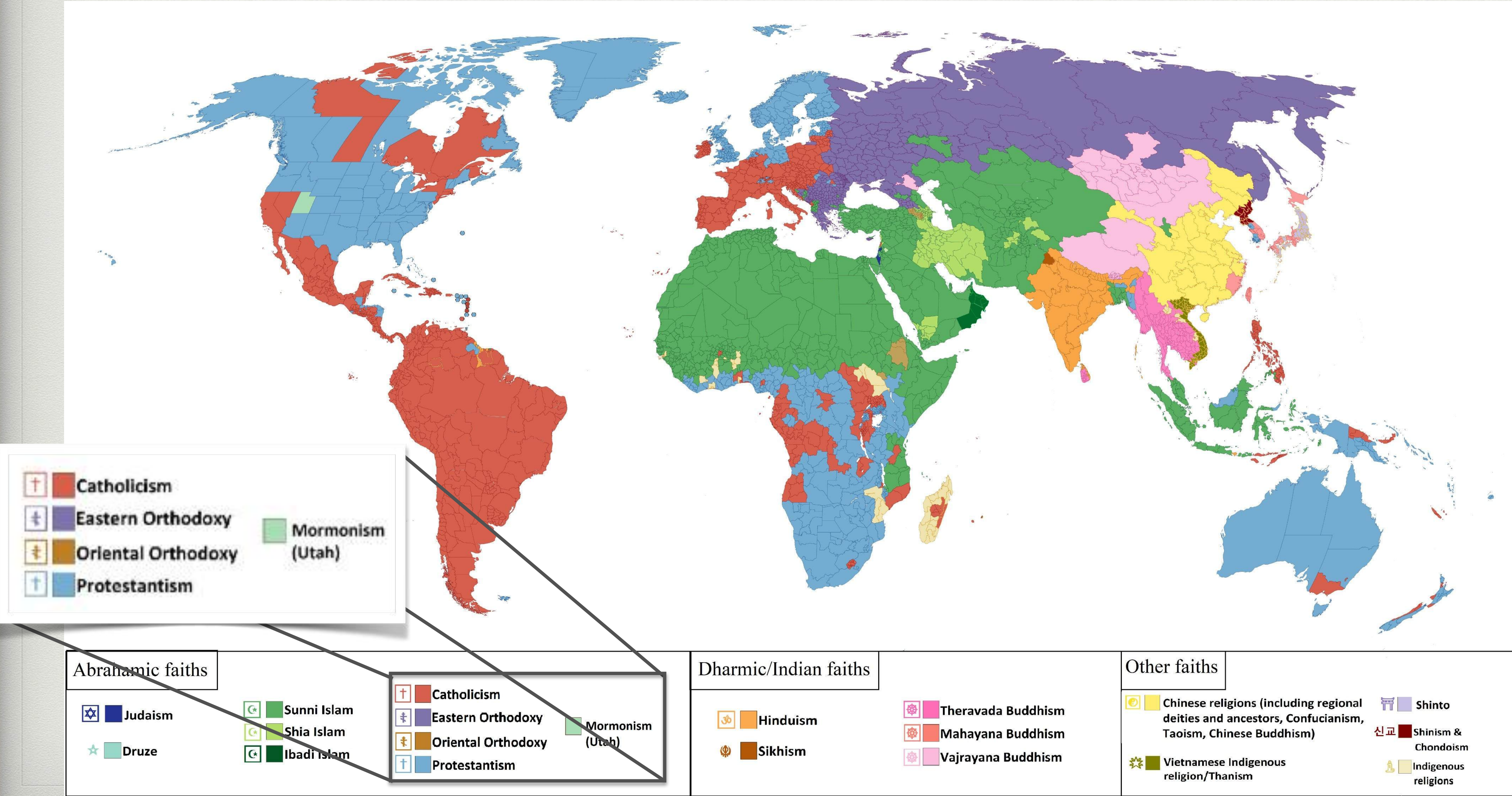
A growing ideological and theological commitment to individual choice and freedom makes coercion distasteful to many Christians

*Religious
Studies -
external factors*

Some nations adopt a separation of church and state model, others degrade the role of established religion

Many Christian traditions and institutions embrace the freedom that can come with autonomy from the state

Where Christendom Has Left Us



The Christian Story (thus far)

The persecuted, dissident early church with its many resistance theologies

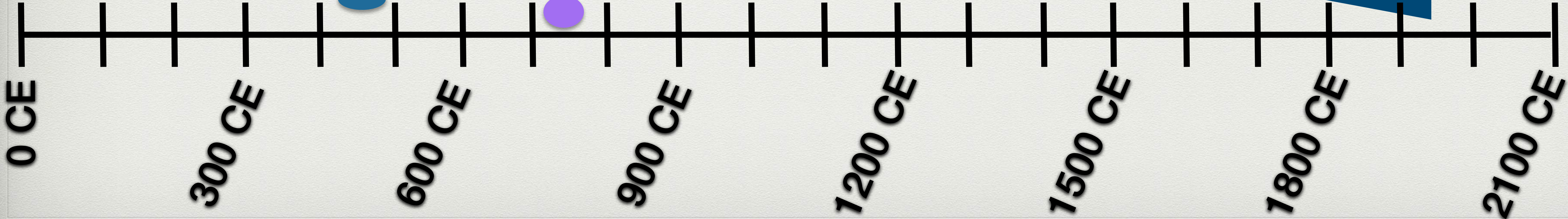
The formation of Christendom

Christendom splits into east & west

Protestant Christendoms emerge



Julian of Norwich



Interaction (word cloud in Slido)

What kinds of 20th- and 21st-century Christian resistance theologies have you heard of?

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20th- and 21st-Century Forms of Resistance Theology

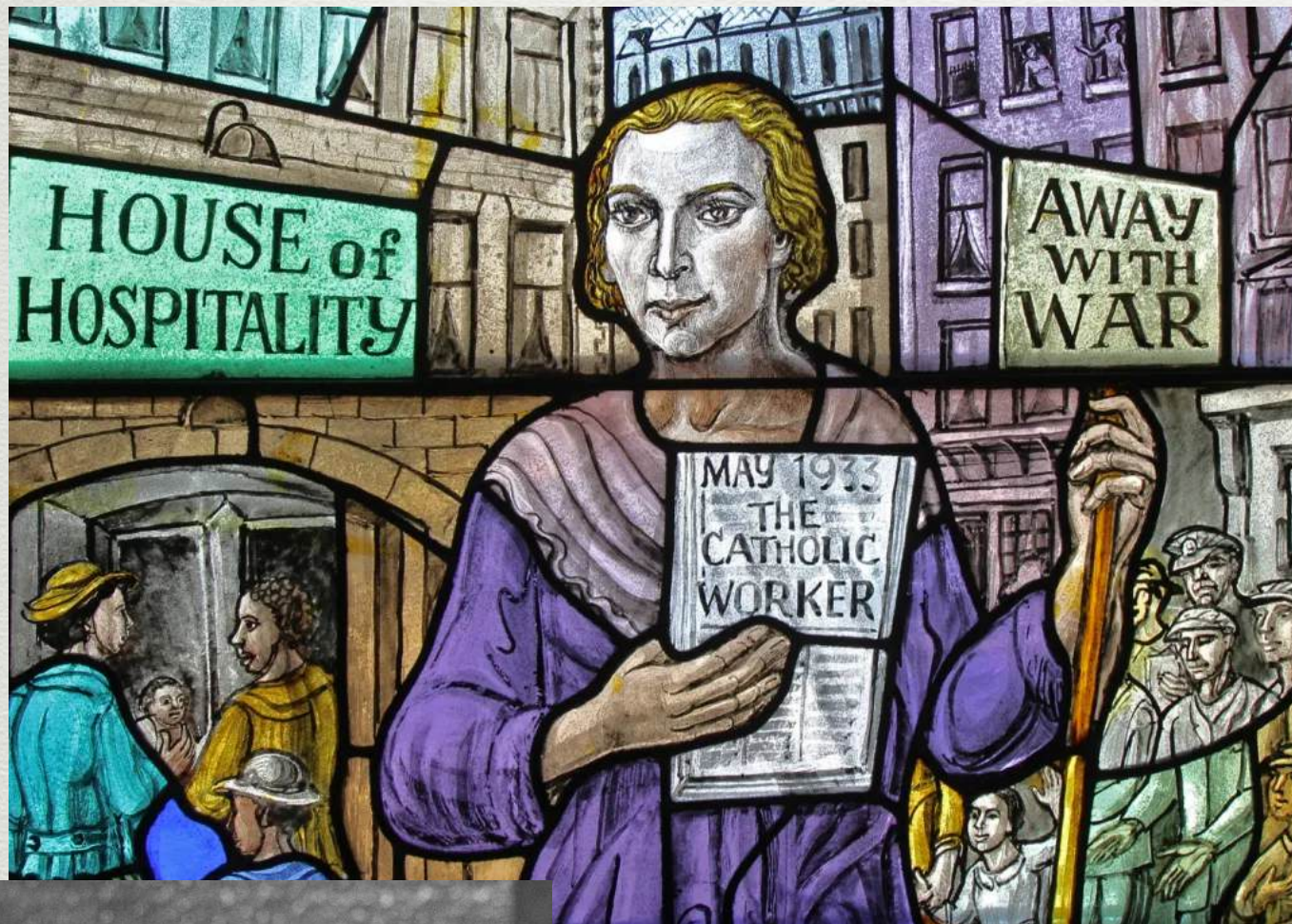


- There's no way to do justice to all of the dozens/hundreds of forms of modern Christian resistance theologies, even if we had a whole semester. This presentation will just be a stone skipping across the surface of a massive lake of amazing theologians and profound ideas.
- By calling these “resistance” theologies, I’m purposefully being a little vague because some are explicitly about resisting Christendom and Christian political dominance and others are about challenging misogyny, racism, and other forms of historical domination.
- All of these draw, in varying degrees, on the anti-wealth, anti-imperial themes of the NT & early church.
- For Christians: You don’t have to love or resonate with all of these (many won’t be in your tradition), but they all demonstrate how multivocal Christianity is.

Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement

1930s - present

Catholic



A fascinating blend of anarchist, feminist, pacifist, communist, and devout Catholic, Dorothy Day (1897-1980) founded the Catholic Worker movement along with her friend and mentor, the Catholic theologian Peter Maurin (1877-1949) in 1933.

The hundreds of Catholic Worker communities today are found in both urban “houses of hospitality” and rural farm communes.

“The Catholic Worker movement is made up of people motivated by the teachings of Jesus, especially as they are summarized in the Sermon on the Mount, and the teachings of the Catholic Church, in the writings of the early Fathers and the social encyclicals of the modern popes, to bring about a ‘new society within the shell of the old, a society in which it will be easier to be good.’ A society in tune with these teachings would have no place for economic exploitation or war, for racial, gender or religious discrimination, but would be marked by a cooperative social order without extremes of wealth and poverty and a nonviolent approach to legitimate defense and conflict resolution.” — Tom Cornell



Barmen Declaration

1934

Protestant: Reformed & Lutheran



German Lutheran Church 1932



Barmen
Synod
delegates

A group of Protestant clergy and theologians created this confessional statement (à la Nicaea) rejecting the ascendent nationalism in the Nazi-affiliated German Christian movement.

8.23 We reject the false doctrine, as though the State, over and beyond its special commission, should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the church's vocation as well.

8.24. We reject the false doctrine, as though the church, over and beyond its special commission, should and could appropriate the characteristics, the tasks, and the dignity of the State, thus itself becoming an organ of the State.



German Christian symbols

The nonviolent Civil Rights Movement 1954-1968

Protestant and Catholic



The CRM was as much a religious movement as it was a political one. It drew heavily on Black theological traditions, adopted Jesus's model of nonviolence, and was led primarily by clergy (Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish).



It is no coincidence that most of the leaders in the forefront of the civil rights movement in the South were clergy or lay church leaders... under-girded by a prophetic progressive faith which led to accepting suffering as a necessary requirement in the struggle for justice and freedom.

- Bernard LaFayette



Second Vatican Council

1962 - 1965

The Catholic Church, under Pope Pius XII, attempted to remain neutral through WWII, even when it knew about the horrors of the holocaust.

Prior to the opening of Vatican II, the Catholic church had consistently upheld principles of human rights, but had not fully endorsed democracy nor embraced religious freedom for all.

The council precipitated a massive change in Catholic life, liturgy, and theology. In its 16 documents, it revises the church's relationship with Judaism and other traditions, but it also offers a theological rationale for religious freedom and (though not always explicitly) democracy.



Catholic

Dignitatis Humanae

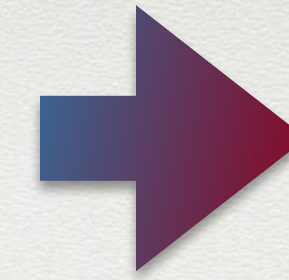
It regards, in the first place, the free exercise of religion in society. This Vatican Council takes careful note of these desires in the minds of men... To this end, it searches into the sacred tradition and doctrine of the Church-the treasury out of which the Church continually brings forth new things that are in harmony with the things that are old.

The council further declares that the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself. This right of the human person to religious freedom is to be recognized in the constitutional law whereby society is governed and thus it is to become a civil right.

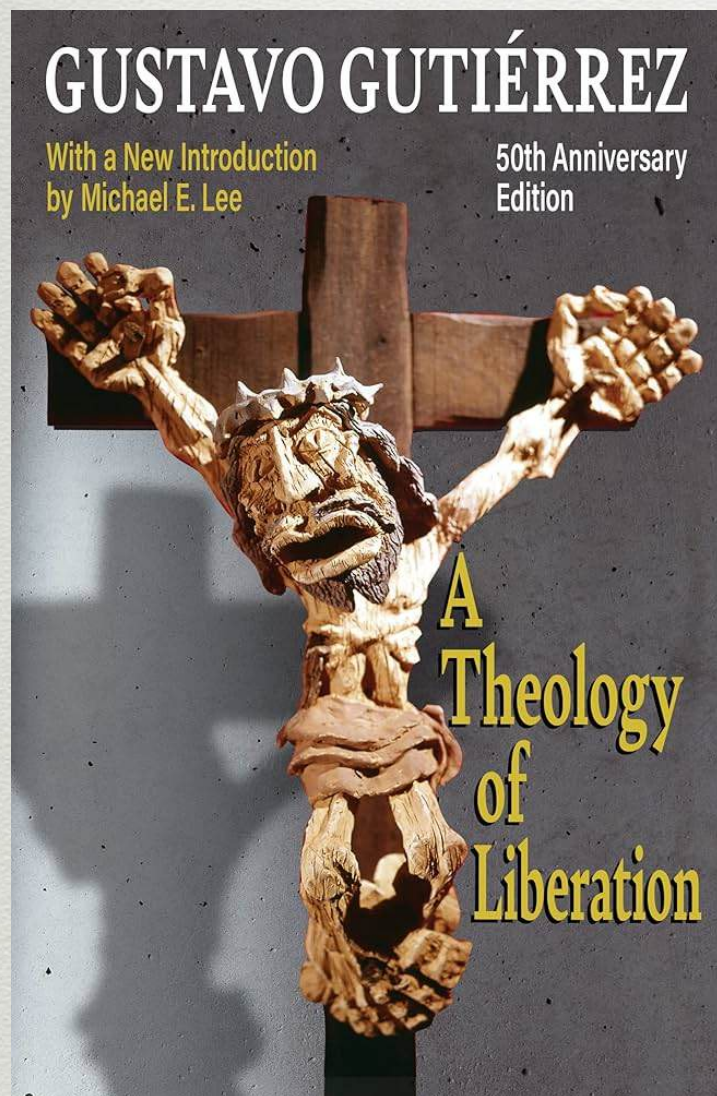
Latin American Liberation Theology

1960s to present

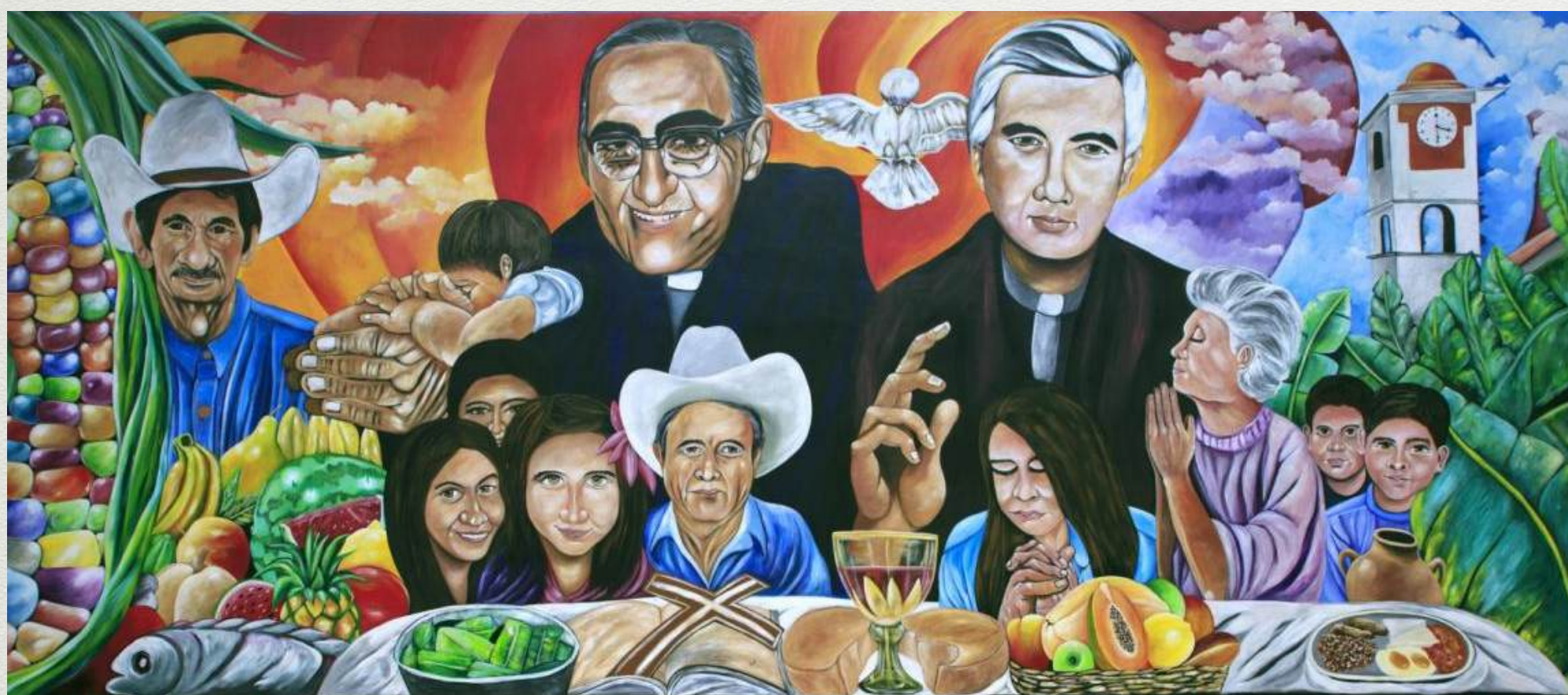
Catholic



Protestant



- During and after Vatican II, a number of Latin American clergy and theologians began reframing Christian theology around the theme of liberation in the context of Latin American oppression and colonialism.
- They were integrating Catholic social teaching, elements of Marxist economic analysis, and a focus on the liberatory themes of the Bible.
- The key phrase for understanding liberation theology is the “preferential option for the poor” —i.e., God prioritizes the needs of the poor and powerless, so their voices should be included and championed in theology.
- Liberation theology exists in tension with the Catholic church hierarchy, with many Catholic clergy leading the movement, but also with pushback and even punishments sometimes coming down on liberation theologians.

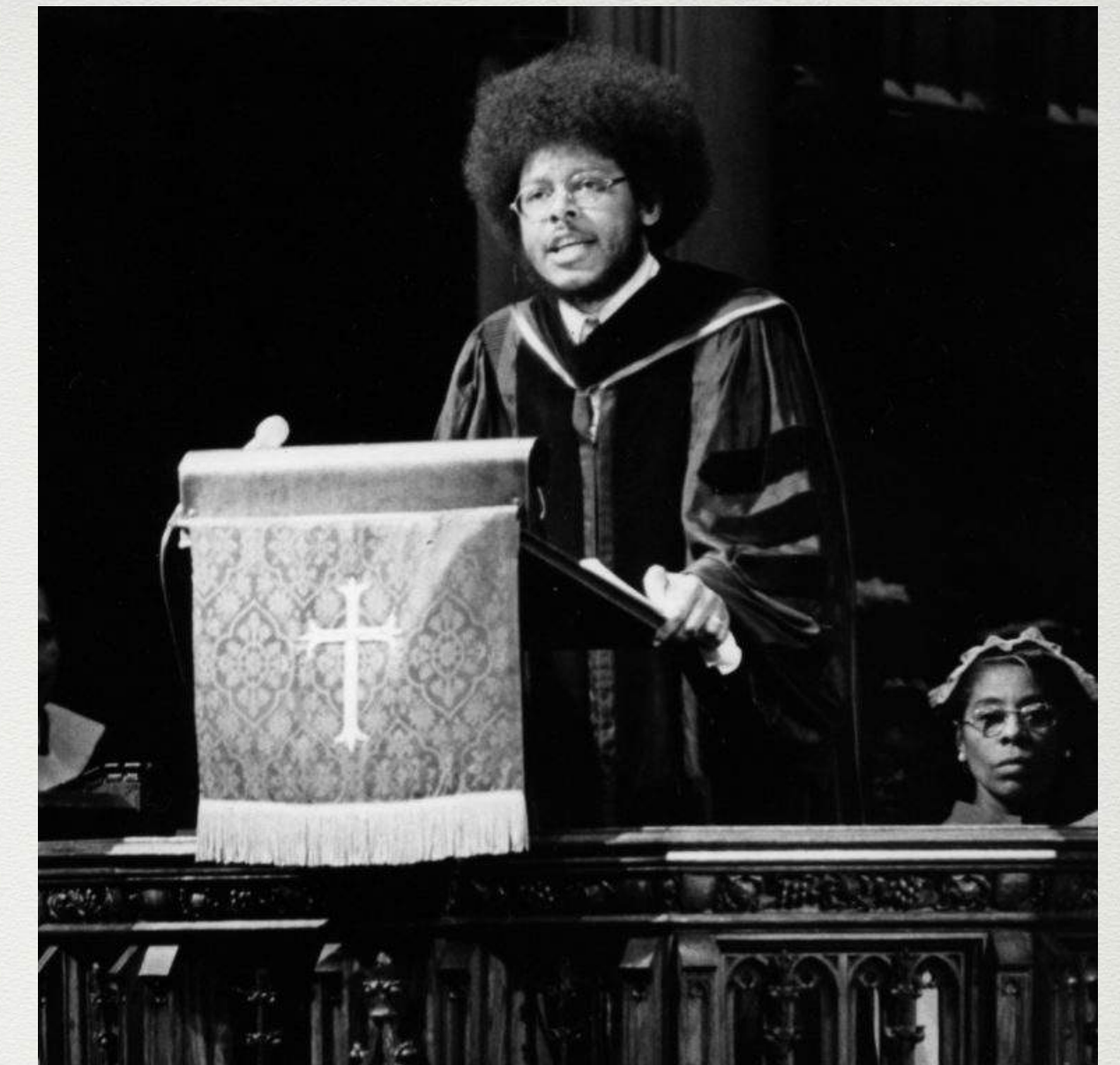
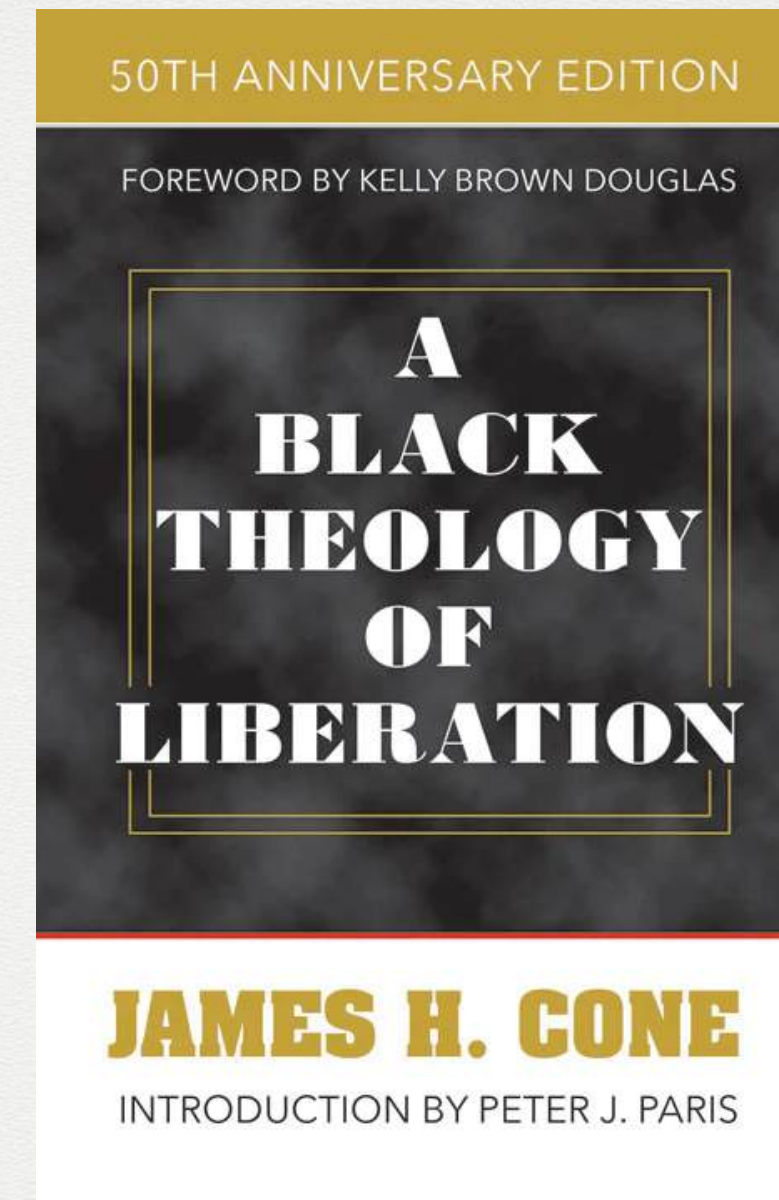


A mural of liberation theologians in El Salvador

Black Theology (a.k.a., Black Liberation Theology)

1960s to present

- Emerging alongside and in conversation with Latin American liberation theology, Black scholars and clergy in the U.S. began framing a theology rooted in the Black experience of enslavement, segregation, and apartheid.
- Black (Christian) theology also grew up in conversation with more secular Black Power thought and Black Muslim voices critiquing Christianity as a harm to Black people (e.g., the “white man’s religion” - Malcolm X).
- With a strong focus on the Exodus story of liberation from slavery in the Bible, Black theology emphasizes not only liberation from oppressive structures in society but also liberation from conceptions of an oppressive God who is on the side of empire and the oppressor.



James Cone preaching in 1969

“God has chosen the blacks as God’s own people. And God has chosen them not for redemptive suffering but for freedom. Blacks are not elected to be Yahweh’s suffering people. Rather we are elected because we are oppressed against our will and God’s, and God has decided to make our liberation God’s own undertaking.”

—James Cone

The Anti-Apartheid Theological Movement

1960s to 1990s

Apartheid, a system of racial segregation and oppression of the Black South African majority by white Afrikaners was justified using Reformed theology, and the “father of apartheid,” Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd (1958-1966) was an ardent Calvinist.



Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Protestant: Anglican & Reformed
and Catholic

But theology was also a leading force to the dismantling of the apartheid system, with Anglican and Reformed clergy and theologians as well as Catholic liberation theologians helping to lead the international and local protests against the whole system.

“From the late 1960s, new theological thinking helped change the course of the churches’ struggle in South Africa. It was part of a world-wide movement which included African theology, liberation theology and black theology.”

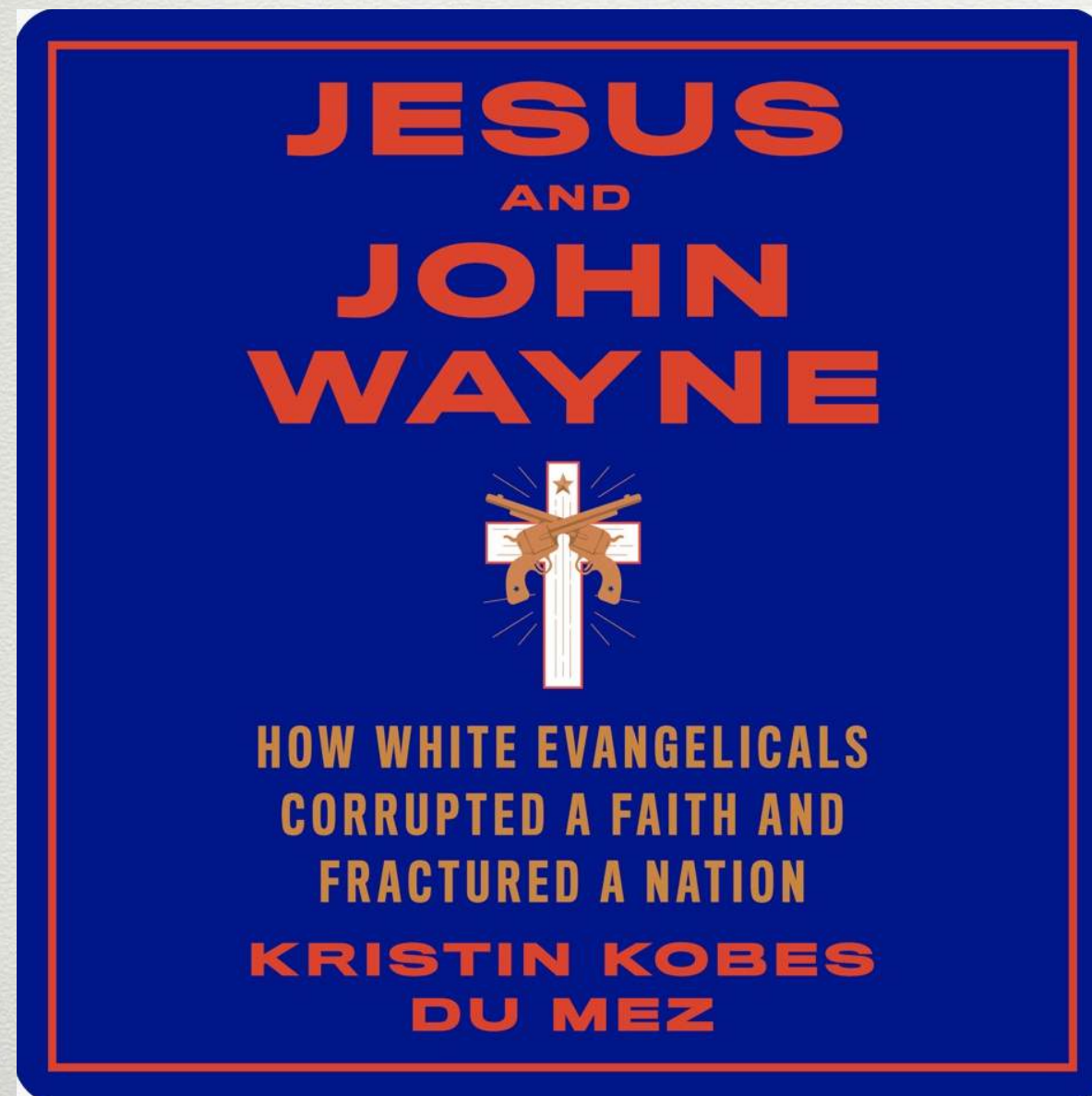
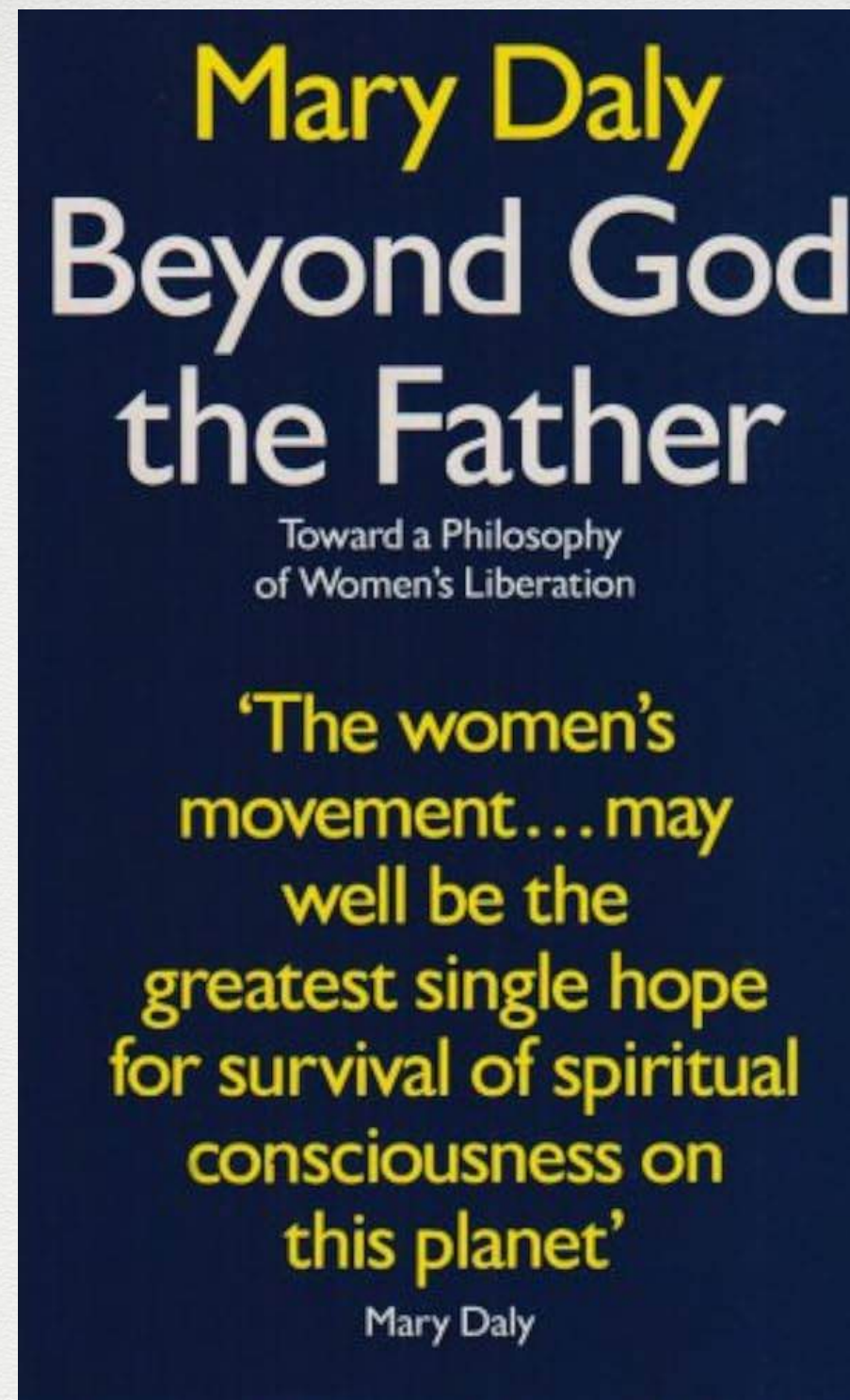
JOHN ALLEN, Tutu biographer

Feminist Theology

1960s to present



Mary Daly (1928-2010)



Kristin Kobes Du Mez

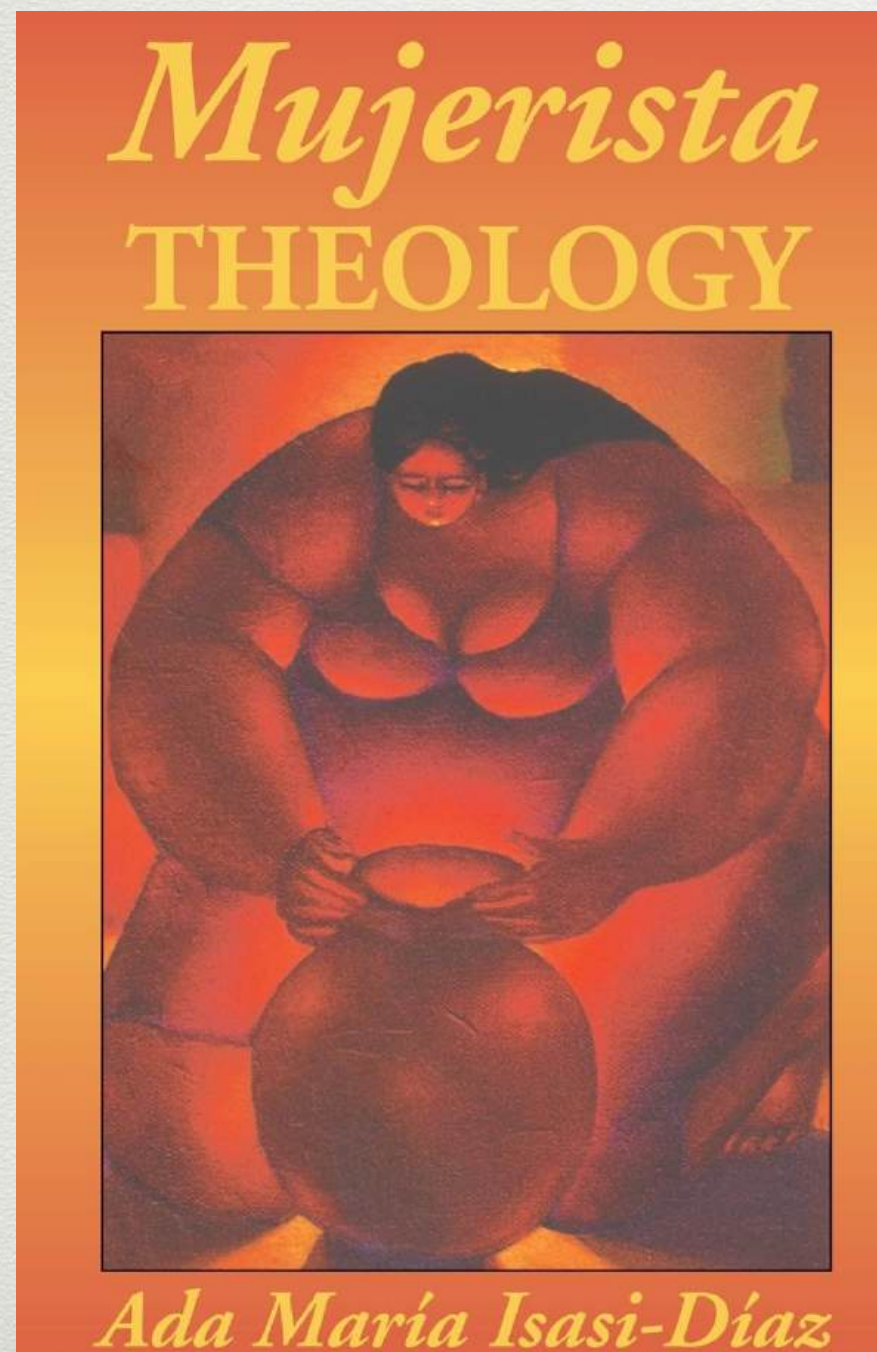
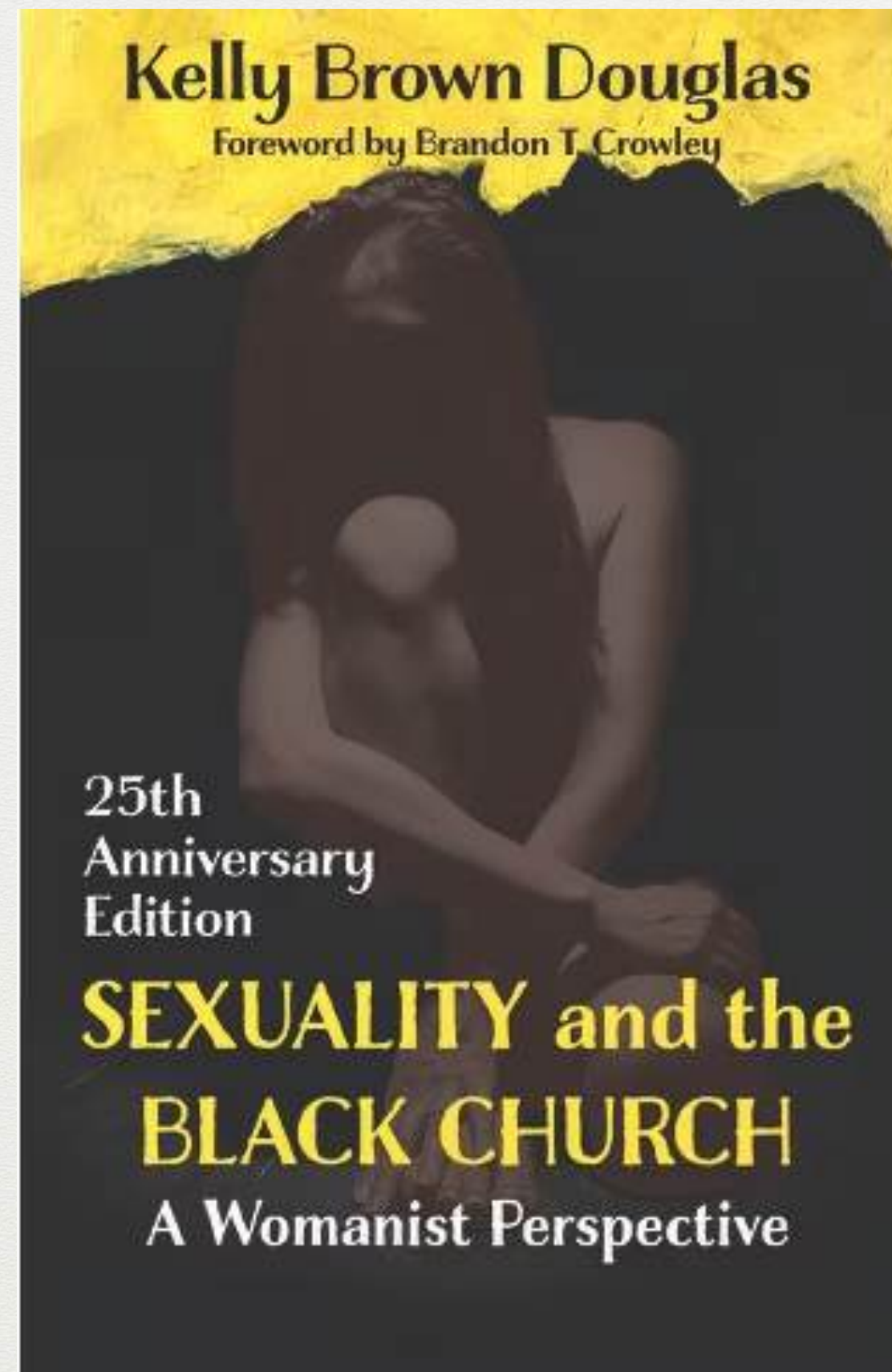
- Arguably, you can find feminist theology (as in, women speaking and writing theologically in a way that centers women's experiences) in almost every religious tradition throughout history.
- But consciously "feminist" theology emerged in the 1960s, especially after Valerie Saiving Goldstein's essay, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View."
- Some early feminist theologians, like Mary Daly, were quite radical, shaping their theological critiques of Christianity out of second-wave feminism.
- Today, there are feminist theologians in virtually every denomination and confession of Christian theology, including evangelicalism, Latter Day Saints, etc.

Womanist Theology and Mujerista Theology

1980s to present



Kelly Brown Douglas



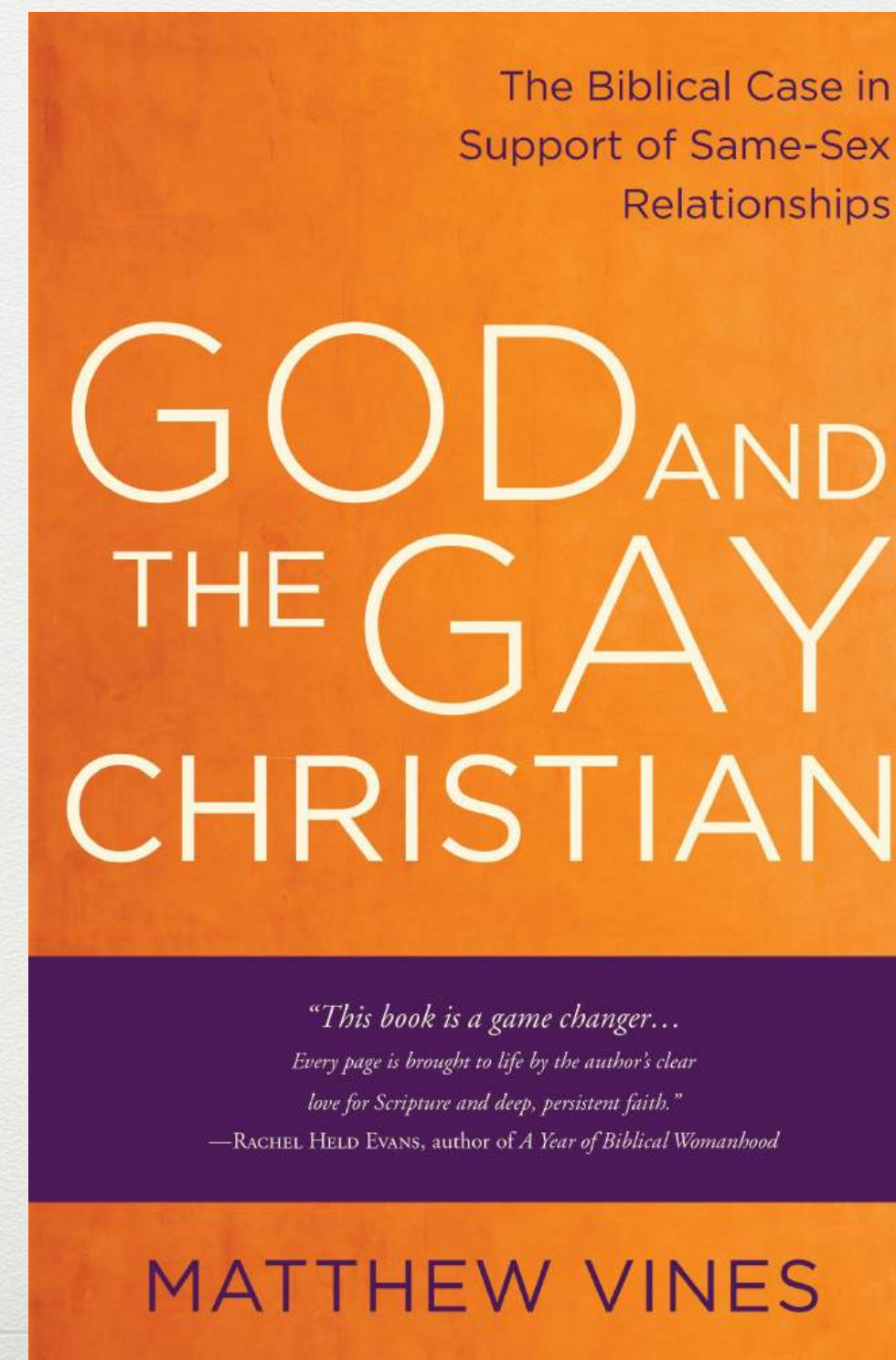
- Womanist theology (which centers the experience of Black — especially African American — women) grew out of a dual critique of Black theology for focusing on Black men's experiences and feminist theology for being driven by white women's concerns.
- Mujerista theology — an emerging field today — similarly situates theology from the perspective of Hispanic/Latina women.
- Drawing on intersectional theory, these female theologians argue that different forms of discrimination and oppression compound, and racism combines with misogyny in many instances, so they need to be addressed together.

Queer Theology

1990s to present

- Queer theology builds upon liberation and feminist themes, but also speaks to the concerns and identities of LGBTQIA people.
- Some queer theologians have theorized that Jesus himself was gay or, at least, nonconforming to the gender norms of his day.
- But you can also find rather conservative forms of queer theology, like that of Matthew Vines, which make the case for same-sex marriage as the only way for gay people to both be equal and be able to live according to monogamous sexual ethics.

The everyday lives of people always provide us with a starting point for a process of doing a contextual theology without exclusions, in this case without the exclusion of sexuality struggling in the midst of misery.
-Marcella Althaus-Reid



Matthew Vines



Disability Theology

1990s to present

...in a healthy society the able-bodied are reminded of the frailty of their beginning and their end, as well as the ever-present possibility of disability or illness, but such recognitions do not inspire fear. Disability theology highlights the contingency, finitude, and fragility of human being, which is an aspect of creaturehood... beginning instead from the reality of universal human limitation and the diversity of human experience.

-Medi Ann Volpe



- Obviously, disability, infirmity, and physical ability/inability have been themes for reflection throughout religious history, but a self-conscious field of disability theology formed in the wake of Nancy Eiesland's 1994 book, *The Disabled God*.
- Rooted in the idea of contextual theology from the liberation movement, disability theology starts with the premise that disabled people can also do theology and can speak from and to their own experiences far better than able-bodied people can.
- Christian disability theologians have especially focused on the scars on the resurrected body of Jesus as a sign that bodily perfection is not a Christian ideal.

Challenging “Phyletism” (a.k.a., “ethnophyletism”) in the Orthodox Tradition

ongoing

ethnophyletism

Greek: *ethnos* (nation) + *phyletikos* (tribal)
—conflating the church and its mission/
destiny with that of a single nation/race

Orthodox Debate Ethnocentric Churches Amid Russia-Ukraine War

MEAGAN SALIASHVILI - RELIGION NEWS SERVICE



- Unlike the centralized Roman Catholic Church, the (Eastern) Orthodox churches developed an autocephalous (appointing their own head) model with multiple branches, hence the Russian Orthodox Church, Greek Orthodox Church, etc.
- The Orthodox Council of Constantinople (1872) condemned ethnophyletism (roughly translated as ethno-religious nationalism) as conflating the universal church with one nation or race’s identity.
- While technically a concept of church-governance, this principle has stirred up new debates and theological arguments in the light of Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, backed by the Russian Orthodox hierarchy.

Interaction (poll in Zoom)

Which of these forms of resistance theology are you interested in exploring more after this course?

And that's not all...

If we had time, we could talk about:

Asian theology

Ecological theology

Palestinian liberation theology

Dalit liberation theology

- These many forms of resistance theology are a big part of what keeps me in Christianity. They speak to the beauty of the gospel that still shines under the swamp of Christian imperialism.
- Worth noting: These many forms of resistance theology are very diverse — all over the political spectrum, in every tradition, creating new traditions, inside institutions and critiquing institutions.
- It's not a coincidence that when colonialism was dismantled and Christendom cracked, all of these beautiful and countercultural theologies found room to speak to the world.
- A Theological Conclusion: Christendom is a theological bastardization of the message of Jesus and the dissident early church.

The Christian Story (thus far)

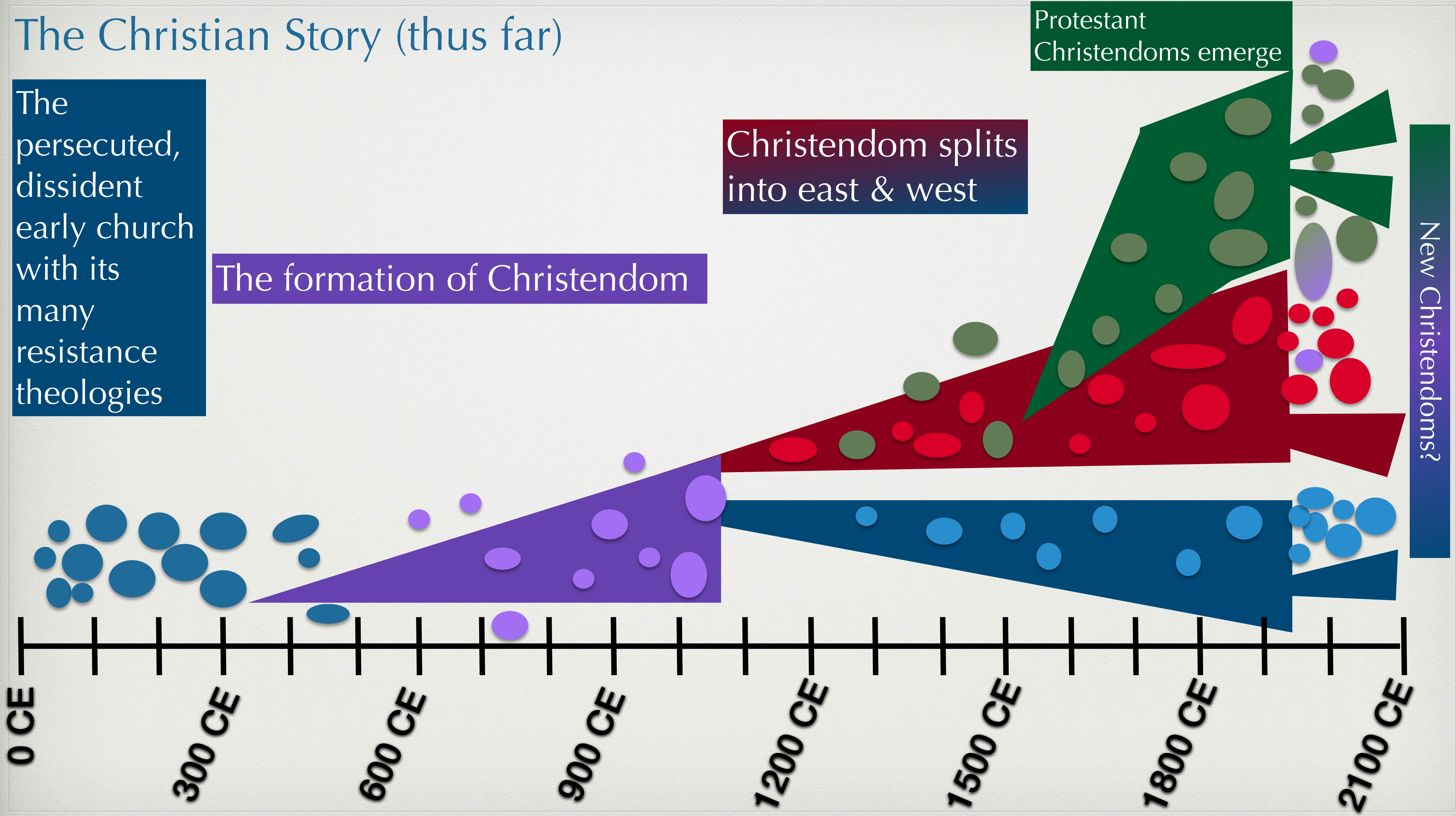
The persecuted, dissident early church with its many resistance theologies

The formation of Christendom

Christendom splits into east & west

Protestant Christendoms emerge

New Christendoms?



The Russian Orthodox Czarists

a.k.a., The reanimated imperial Russian church

- The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) was periodically persecuted and repressed under Soviet rule, but, since the end of the Cold War has been integrated back into Russian life.
- Since 2009, Patriarch Kirill has closely allied the church with Putin, particularly in the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. He has blessed Russian troops, used holy war language, and mimicked Putin's authoritarian talking points.
- Putin sees the ROC as a crucial component of restoring a czarist empire.
- This retrenchment and propaganda from Kirill have sparked protests among ROC clergy, who are alarmed by the church's synchronization with Putin's ambitions.



Vladimir Putin with Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church



J.D. Vance's
conversion to
Catholicism



CATHOLICS FOR TRUMP

Catholics for Trump will energize and activate the Catholic community in re-electing President Donald J. Trump by sharing the many successes of the Trump administration. Re-electing President Trump will ensure continued victories in pro-life issues, judicial appointments, and religious freedom.

MEET THE ADVISORY BOARD

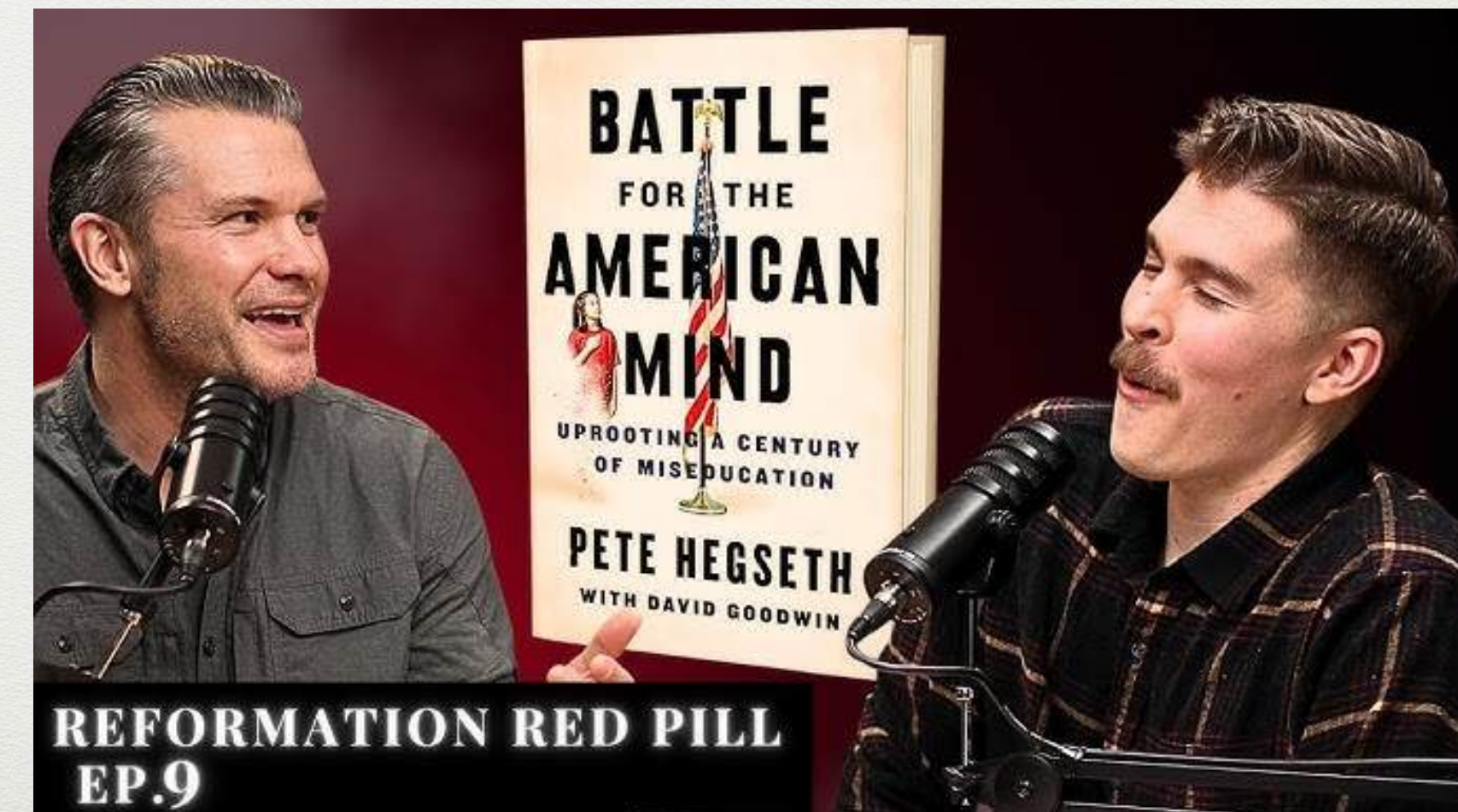


The Anti-Vatican II Catholics a.k.a., RadTrads, Integralists, post-liberal

- Though there are many conservative factions in the Catholic church, one thing that unites many of them is the rejection or criticism of the Vatican II reforms. Sometimes this is signified by an embrace of the Latin Mass.
- They generally see a need for the church to take a more proactive and assertive role in shaping society around “objective natural” (i.e., Christian) morality.
- Some ideas on the table: anti-heresy laws, anti-blasphemy laws, banning books, etc.
- This segment today is especially activating new converts like J.D. Vance, younger conservative Catholics, and priests.

The Radicalized Reformed Crowd a.k.a., Reconstructionists, Theobros

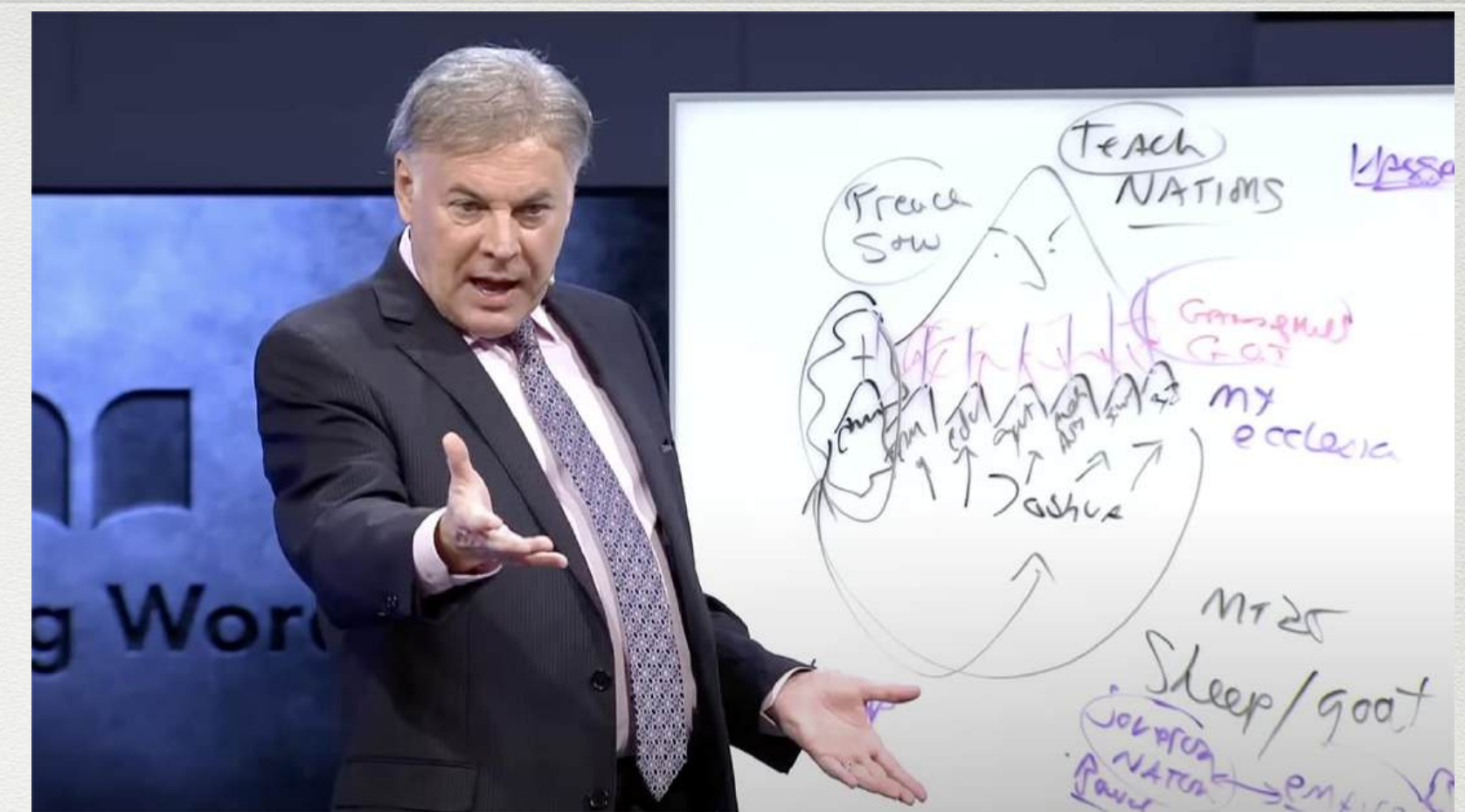
- Grounded in the reanimation some older Calvinist ideas about the coordination between the church's and government's moral influence on society.
- The Reconstructionists, a theological movement beginning in the 1960s, advocated for the gradual Christianization of society through application of biblical law.
- Some keywords: theonomy (divine law), postmillennialism (building God's kingdom on earth), presuppositionalism (rejecting all truth not derived from doctrine), dominion (Christians taking power over society).
- They often embrace militant visions of Christianity, valorize the Crusades, emphasize male authority over females, and even talk openly about recreating Christendom.



The Seven Mountains Spiritual Warriors

a.k.a., New Apostolic Reformation, dominion theology

- Located primarily within the very fast-growing Pentecostal-charismatic segment of global Christianity, these leaders champion the idea of Christians taking dominion over every “mountain” (sphere) of society.
- They believe in an elaborate demonology, often accuse their political opponents of being possessed, and engage in spiritual warfare practices to dethrone supposed demonic hierarchies.
- Though popular in evangelical circles, these leaders were marginal until Trump brought many of them into his inner circle, giving them added political cache on the religious right.
- Many of these leaders were heavily involved in January 6th, and they’ve infused contemporary evangelicalism with a new militant, Christian supremacist theological vision.



Lance Wallnau, Trump's most effective Christian propagandist





Religious Studies

Interaction (open form answer in Slido)

For Christians (theology): Where have you seen these theologies emerging or operative in your own tradition?

For non-Christians (religious studies): Which of these feels like the most potent threat to pluralism today?

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Final Thoughts

- One of the critical questions of the 21st-century: Will Christian imperialism and Christendom return?
- For the first time, since the 4th century, the resistance theologies have some real institutional heft and widespread support, but we should not underestimate the powerful habits of mind that Christian supremacy has cultivated in the collective Christian imagination.
- As it was in the 4th century, none of this is predetermined. Christians have a role to play in pushing the blob toward pluralism, religious freedom, and interreligious friendship without domination.

I was saved by God to make America great again...

The United States will once again consider itself a growing nation — one that increases our wealth, expands our territory, builds our cities, raises our expectations, and carries our flag into new and beautiful horizons.

**And we will pursue our manifest destiny into the stars, launching American astronauts to plant the Stars and Stripes on the planet Mars.
—Trump's Second Inaugural (January 20, 2025)**