

Reviews

There's a point in his new book *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right* when Princeton University professor Mark Lewis Taylor draws a passage from author Bob Woodward's book *Bush at War*. Taylor says the words remind us of President George W. Bush's most natural language regarding his power. "I'm the commander — see, I don't need to explain — I do not need to explain why I say things. That's the interesting thing about being president. Maybe somebody needs to explain to me why they say something, but I don't feel like I owe anybody an explanation."

When I reach Taylor by telephone at his home in Princeton, New Jersey, I ask him about the passage and Bush's willingness to bypass the law when it comes to things like wiretapping and the McCain torture bill. "A willingness to bypass the law is correct," he says. "I would also characterize it as the disrespect for the public art of persuading the wider society of the rightness of one's position. It's classically exhibited in the way Bush signed the McCain bill on torture. He signed it, but essentially he said 'I'm commander-in-chief and I'll do what I have to do with this bill.' He has pursued that logic throughout his presidency."

But Taylor has detected a shift in public attitude toward the Bush administration. "I do think people are becoming especially concerned — particularly around the National Security Agency's spying and wiretapping," he says. "There is much anger out there cutting across progressives and conservatives."

Taylor is the Maxwell M. Upson Professor of Theology and Culture at Princeton Theological Seminary. Since the late 1980s he has studied regularly in Guatemala and in Chiapas, Mexico, where he analyzes the cultural and political dynamics of the churches as they move closer to a contextualized Mayan theology that also facilitates resistance to military repression.

His previous books include: *Remembering Esperanza: A Cultural-Political Theology for North American Praxis* and *The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America*.

Since its publication last year *Religion, Politics and the Christian Right* has captured the attention of some distinguished people — including praise from Taylor's colleague at Princeton University, Cornel West. "Mark Lewis Taylor is the most prophetic theologian, political activist and cultural critic of his generation. There is simply no one on the scene like him," he says.

Taylor's description of the alliance of the Christian right and neo-conservatives in the U.S. is concise. He says they share a fervor and political will to constrict power to one group and to one nation. "The heart of the neoconservative perspective — especially as it relates to an understanding of the U.S. nation — is a uni-polar drive to assert U.S. power in primarily the form of unrivalled U.S. supremacy. The key architects that accept the moniker of neoconservative especially talk about that military supremacy."

For Taylor the "ominous fact" of the Bush regime's war is that we're all steeped in a culture of war. That has serious consequences. Taylor quotes war correspondent Chris Hedges who says the culture "distorts memory, corrupts language and infects everything around it."

Among the many significant things Taylor writes about in his book is the need for a prophetic spirit. "Prophetic spirit is a cultural-political current that uses mythic languages, art, and political practices to create justice and peace for the weak, for the marginalized and oppressed without whose emancipation the whole body politics lives in travail," he writes.

He adds that: "Prophetic spirit is a persistent, insurgent tradition that carries and generates new social practices needed in this post-9/11 moment."

But Taylor also speaks about the need for reconciliatory emancipation. It's a key phrase in understanding what he takes Christian experience and living to be. "What I'm trying to hold together in my vision of being a Christian is not easy. First, there is my primary commitment to the politics of liberation," he says. "In that regard I'm very much in tune with liberation theology. But I'm holding that together with what I call a reconciliatory posture. It's a posture which looks at the various sites of liberating practice. It doesn't just assume there is one such site. It doesn't buy into — at least with any comfort — the idea of a vanguard as a privileged site for liberatory practice. Although in the real world of politics those kinds of special leadership sites will probably be important."

Taylor continues saying: "I would like to see Christians participate in movements where liberation is a primary value, but with a sense that this value can be strengthened and forged in a variety of social dimensions, including the personal, psychological, economic, and artistic."

In revitalizing American visions of spirit that are prophetic and public — Taylor speaks about "expectant being." He says that expectant being is held in tension along with belonging being. I ask him to describe what he means by the terms. "Expectant being is that deep part of human group life in which people usually have some expectation of advancement or betterment for themselves or their family," he says. "It could be something as crass as dreaming to be a millionaire. Or as simple as liking life to be a little bit better for their children."

But Taylor says expectant being is being manipulated. "What contemporary turbo capitalism and the crassest of neo-liberalism is doing today is to harness that almost undeniable interest of human being and driving it along a consumerist track towards frenzy where eventually important questions about what limits there should be on consumerism and corporate capital's interests are not asked," he explains. "It's a part of human being that is being colonized by capitalist culture and neo-liberal corporate culture."

This is precisely where prophetic spirit comes on the scene, Taylor says. "It speaks to the desire for expectant new growth and betterment," he adds. "But in a way that respects the needs of all people in society and doesn't just worship at the altar of progress itself."

Toward the end of his book, Taylor writes how the Christian Gospel is born from the "underside" of empire. "It has its fundamental meaning as a life of faith and action for communities that dare to take on empire," he explains. "It has a power, as the early Christians knew, not simply to challenge worship of the emperor, for which early Christians have often been dramatized, but also to challenge the habits of empire, the very ways it builds community. The ability to challenge, to live outside the imperial frame even when it was seemingly ubiquitous and ruthless, is intrinsic to the power of the gospel."

As we close our conversation, I ask Taylor where he finds signs of hope today — especially in the midst of rising political and economic inequality. "I'm old enough to remember the struggle against the war in Vietnam," he says. "Even though we didn't stop the assault and occupation in Iraq, the fact that there were hundreds of thousands and millions globally that came out into the streets in mass mobilizations and organized against the war in Iraq — in contrast to during the Vietnam period when that opposition had to develop over time — that's a positive sign.

He continues, saying: "There is an opposition out there and it is organized. It's splintered. It's divided along some important fault lines that we have to work and find ways to bridge. But it's there."

Finally, Taylor says there are significant signs of what Paul Kennedy has called "imperial overreach" in his analysis of recent U.S. history. "What we will be left with in this country once imperial overreach runs aground in any number of ways remains uncertain," he says. But he remains hopeful: "What we need to be ready for is some sort of kairos moment. An opportunity that comes at a crisis, but yet is an opportunity for experimenting with something new."

— Gerry McCarthy is Editor of *The Social Edge*