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## What is Christian Hegemony?

*Adapted from Living in the Shadow of the Cross*

*By Paul Kivel*

I define *Christian hegemony* as the everyday, systematic set of Christian values, individuals and institutions that dominate all aspects of US society. Nothing is unaffected.<sup>1</sup>

Christian dominance is a complex and shifting system that benefits all Christians, those raised Christian and those passing as Christian. However, the concentration of power and wealth accumulates to a predominantly Christian power elite.<sup>2</sup> All others experience exploitation and constant vulnerability to violence.

This dominance operates on several levels. First is the subtle internalization of Christian beliefs by individuals. The behavior and voting patterns of millions of people in the United States are influenced by concepts such as original sin, manifest destiny, the existence of “the one truth” contained within Christianity and the notion that humans were given dominion over the earth.

The social, political and economic (as opposed to spiritual) power that individual clergy exert on people’s lives is another level of impact. Many clergy condone US expansionism, missionary activity towards non-Christians and exclusion of groups deemed sinful or dangerous.

Some denominations wield very significant power in the US. For example, the Mormon, Catholic and other churches, along with many individual religious leaders, raised





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millions of dollars and mobilized constituents to vote for Proposition 8 on the California ballot - a 2008 measure that made same-sex marriage illegal.<sup>3</sup>

There is also a vast network of parachurch organizations - general tax-supported nonprofits such as hospitals, broadcasting networks, publishing houses, lobbying groups and organizations like Focus on the Family, Prison Fellowship, The Family, World Vision, International Association of Character Cities<sup>4</sup> - and thousands of others which wield influence in particular spheres of the US and internationally. As just one example, the Child Evangelism Fellowship runs Good News Clubs in public schools across the US, teaching hundreds of thousands of children to find Jesus and proselytize other children.<sup>5</sup>

Another level of Christian dominance comes from the power elite, those who control the largest and most powerful institutions in the US. The Koch brothers (combined net worth \$43 billion), Rupert Murdoch (over \$8 billion), the Walton Family (combined net worth over \$90 billion)<sup>6</sup> and the Council for National Policy<sup>7</sup> exert this kind of power.

And finally there is the level that provides the foundation for all the others: the deep legacy of ideas, values and practices produced within dominant western Christianity over the centuries. That legacy continues to shape our culture and frame public policies.

All these levels of Christian dominance have significant impacts. The personal shows up in the way many Christians internalize feelings of superiority, entitlement and judgment - as well as guilt - while those who are not Christian may primarily internalize low self-worth.

Interpersonal effects include specific acts of aggression directed at those who are not





Christian or Christian of the wrong sort e.g. people who are LGBTTTQ.<sup>8</sup>

The institutional effects show up in the ways the health care, educational and criminal legal systems favor Christians and Christian values and treat others as outside society's circle of caring. For example, most institutional policies privilege Christian holidays and cultural norms, treating other religions' practices as unusual and therefore easily dismissed. The levels of this institutionalized system of dominance are interconnected, so the cumulative impact creates a structure that is all-encompassing.

Christian dominance has become so invisible that its manifestations even appear to be secular. In this context, the oxymoronic phrase *secular Christian dominance* might be most appropriate. Of course, there are many forms of Christian fundamentalism which are anything but secular. But the more mainstream, everyday way these seemingly subtle values influence our lives is less evident, although no less significant. This less visible Christian hegemony is the focus of *In the Shadow of the Cross*.

One measure of hegemony might be how much its values and beliefs are internalized by those who oppose it. As Belgian physicist Jean Bricmont has written, "... the strength of an ideological system lies in the extent to which its presuppositions are shared by the people who think of themselves as its most radical critics."<sup>9</sup> Later in this book I'll look at this question in more depth.

This book is not about Christianity. It is about dominance. Christians and Christian institutions have done many beneficial things over the centuries, such as feeding the hungry, setting up housing programs, providing medical care and fighting for social justice. There have been many varieties of Christianity, and there has always been resistance to the version which ruling elites have used to justify their actions. Many of the hurtful, dominant values I explore here were slow to develop over the centuries. Other versions of Christianity were attacked, their leaders silenced and their stories erased from history so that today what we accept as primary Christian values are





usually those enforced by ruling elites.

For example, for centuries Christianity was committed to nonviolence, to the value of Jesus' life, not his death, exalting his resurrection rather than his crucifixion. He was not imagined or portrayed dead on the cross as a martyr, but alive as a healer and teacher. Creating paradise on earth, in the here and now, was the primary goal of Christians, not waiting for salvation in some future time or place.<sup>10</sup> Women had leadership positions in the early church, homosexuality was accepted,<sup>11</sup> and war was condemned. In fact, Roman soldiers were not allowed by the early church to be baptized and become Christians.<sup>12</sup>

Various movements continued to reestablish Christian rituals and practices based upon different values and interpretations than those dominant today. But during the fourth through the ninth centuries, Christian leaders gained increasing control over major aspects of European life. Their dominance was consolidated in subsequent centuries as ruling elites in Western societies used Christianity to justify and expand their power and wealth. During these many centuries, a set of concepts and beliefs became the implicit framework of civil society for many people, affecting every aspect of daily life.

Certain words, symbols and practices resonate with that history. Ruling elites draw on words such as *crusade*, *inquisition* or even *Christian*, symbols like the cross, concepts like evil or hell and practices like public prayer. This is especially true in times of crisis, such as after 9/11 when such tools were used to marshal public opinion to invade two Islamic countries and pass the *USA Patriot Act*.

1. I will use the phrase *Christian dominance* interchangeably with Christian hegemony, depending upon context.

2. The power elite is the loose network of 7-10,000 predominantly white, Christian men who are the decision-makers of the largest economic, political and cultural institutions. See: C. Wright Mills. *The Power Elite*. Oxford, 2000 and Paul Kivel. *You Call This a Democracy? Who Benefits, Who Pays and Who Really*





*Decides*. Apex Press, 2006, pp. 21-6.

3. Protect Marriage, the official proponent of Proposition 8, estimated that about half the donations they received came from Mormon sources and that LDS church members made up somewhere between 80% and 90% of the volunteers for early door-to-door canvassing: Jesse McKinley and Kirk Johnson. "Mormons Tipped Scale in Ban on Gay Marriage." *New York Times*, November 14, 2008. [online]. [cited October 24, 2012]. [nytimes.com/2008/11/15/us/politics/15marriage.html?\\_r=3&pagewanted=1&hp&oref=slogin](http://nytimes.com/2008/11/15/us/politics/15marriage.html?_r=3&pagewanted=1&hp&oref=slogin).

4. Founded by James Dobson, Focus on the Family had an annual budget of over \$137 million in 2004 and controls magazines, TV and radio stations with an estimated reach of 220 million people in 164 countries: Right Wing Watch. *Focus on the Family*. [online]. [cited February 15, 2013]. [rightwingwatch.org/content/focus-family](http://rightwingwatch.org/content/focus-family). Chuck Colson's Prison Fellowship International is a global association of over 110 national Prison Ministry Fellowship organizations: "Frequently Asked Questions." Prison Fellowship International. [online]. [cited March 27, 2013]. [pfi.org/about-us/faq](http://pfi.org/about-us/faq). The Family is a tremendously powerful and secretive political organization that works with right-wing political leaders around the world and in US political circles: Jeff Sharlet, *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power*. Harper Perennial, 2008. World Vision International is a Christian relief, development and advocacy organization with a budget of nearly \$1 billion: [worldvision.org](http://worldvision.org). The International Association of Character Cities works with schools, cities and businesses to establish organizations based on Christian values: [characterfirst.com](http://characterfirst.com).

5. Katherine Stewart. *The Good News Club: The Christian Right's Stealth Assault on America's Children*. Public Affairs, 2012. p. 45.

6. Numbers are from "The World's Billionaires." *Forbes*, calculated March 2012. [online]. [cited November 7, 2012]. [forbes.com/billionaires/list/#p\\_2\\_s\\_a0\\_All%20industries\\_All%20countries\\_All%20states](http://forbes.com/billionaires/list/#p_2_s_a0_All%20industries_All%20countries_All%20states).

7. The secretive Council, started by Tim LaHaye author of the *Left Behind* book series, consists of political figures, religious leaders and conservative Christian funders. Members have included Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Ralph Reed, Richard DeVos, Beverly LaHaye, Howard Ahmanson, Joseph Coors, Sr, James Dobson, and Nelson Bunker Hunt: "Council for National Policy." *NNDB: Tracking the Entire World*. [online]. [cited November 6, 2012]. [nndb.com/org/700/000051547/](http://nndb.com/org/700/000051547/). The Council's website says it promotes "limited government, a strong national defense and traditional Judeo-Christian values:" Council for National Policy. [online]. [cited March 27, 2013]. [cfnp.org/](http://cfnp.org/). More information is available at: David D. Kirkpatrick. "Club of the Most Powerful Gathers in Strictest Privacy." *New York Times*, August 28, 2004. [online]. [cited November 6, 2012]. [nytimes.com/2004/08/28/politics/campaign/28conserve.html?ex=1146110400&en=f173712f417dcad1&ei=5070](http://nytimes.com/2004/08/28/politics/campaign/28conserve.html?ex=1146110400&en=f173712f417dcad1&ei=5070).

8. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual and queer.

9. Jean Bricmont. *Humanitarian Imperialism: Using Human Rights to Sell War*. *Monthly Review*, 2006, p. 91.

10. For a detailed discussion of the history of these changes see: Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker. *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*. Beacon,





2008.

11. For a history of early Christian attitudes towards homosexuals see: John Boswell. *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*. University of Chicago, 1980.

12. Michael R. Steele. *Christianity, The Other, and the Holocaust*. Greenwood, 2003, p. 23.

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