

# A Dangerous Conflation of Ideologies: the Nexus of Christianity and Neoliberalism

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## Abstract

This paper explores the ideological reinforcement, shaping, and justification of neoliberalism contrived from Christian elements. The irony and unlikely marriage of lower class Christians accepting an economic policy platform that is detrimental to them is laid out as a puzzle. Then, alternate theories and explanations are introduced and built upon. The way in which Christianity is framed is hypothesized to have a greater importance in ideological formation than the power of political coalitions or simply the result of shifting demographics. The video series, “The Truth Project”, produced and disseminated by Focus on the Family, an evangelical Christian organization, is analyzed for elements of neoliberalism that are reinforced or justified. Finally, the dangers of this alliance and the general process of ideological formation are commented on.

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## **Introduction**

“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”

Luke 16:13

“Honor the Lord with your wealth and with the first fruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.”

Proverbs 3:9-10

Despite the contradictions in these two scriptures, and others throughout the Bible, the overwhelming majority of US citizens who self-identify as Christian hold a suite of congruent economic, political, and social beliefs. If the sacred text of Christians contains contradictions such as these, how is it that US Christians today have developed such a cohesive ideology? How do they choose what scripture to pay attention to, and which parts to ignore?

Given the homogeneity of beliefs among Christians and the diversity of prescriptions found in the Bible, it would be surprising to think that each Christian has carefully considered every lesson of the Bible, has reflected critically upon what they have read, and then come to some conclusion about morality and the optimal design of the overarching social structure. If they did this, there would be a different interpretation of the bible for each individual. Instead, what we observe is that most Christians subscribe to the dogma prescribed by the particular sect of Christianity that they are a part of.

Christianity certainly maintains great diversity, but the overwhelming majority of American Christians have a congruent dogma, and thus a congruent conservative political-social-economic ideology. If religious dogma is accepted as a premise, then there will be implications for the concluding ideological beliefs. This paper will focus exclusively on American Christians who maintain a conservative ideology. These could be mainline or evangelical Christians, Catholic or Protestant, but this analysis excludes “liberal” denominations of Christianity, as these people are outliers. Examples of the demographic being excluded include believers in “Liberation Theology”, “Creation Care” subscribers<sup>1</sup>, independent Christian leftists, or other politically, socially, or economically progressive denominations such as some Unitarian Universalists. The congruent dogma of mainline or evangelical Christian religion reinforces, shapes, and justifies a congruent and cohesive political-economic ideology. Many forces in society shape the political-economic ideology of this demographic, but the focus of this paper will be on religious dogma.

There is a great deal of overlap in the suite of social, political, and economic beliefs held by Christians and those associated with neoliberalism. In fact, we observe that most Christians vote the same way as economic conservatives, also called neoliberals. Neoliberalism has traditionally been conceptualized as a set of policy commitments centered around the removal of barriers to international trade, such as taxes or tariffs, but recently this term has come to be used to describe a suite of domestic policies as well. Besides trade liberalization, these include: the rollback or lowering of environmental and labor regulation or standards, a regressive tax rate, and a decrease in

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<sup>1</sup> Liberation Theology is a Christian doctrine that focuses on the plight of the poor and has connections with Marxism and socialism. Creation Care is Christian doctrine that emphasizes environmental justice and stewardship of the environment.

the size of government and a destruction of the social services it provides (Harvey, 2005; Klein, 2007.) Neoliberalism has ideological commitments such as a strong emphasis on individualism and self-reliance, and has become the prevailing ideology for modern, Western society. It undergirds the free-market capitalist system. For the purposes of this paper and clarity, I will mostly focus on the domestic policy prescriptions of this ideology, rather than the international aspect.

The confluence of religious socio-political beliefs and the political-economic ideology of neoliberalism manifests itself in the Republican party. In the U.S. there is a strong correlation between individual's degree of religiosity and partisanship; the more religious a person is, the more likely they are to be affiliated with the Republican Party. "Perhaps the most visible change in American religion over the last generation is the role it has come to play in the nation's politics. Religiosity has partisan overtones now that it did not have in the past. While there are notable exceptions, the most highly religious Americans are likely to be Republicans; Democrats predominate among those who are least religious."(Putnam, 2010). In the US, both parties are distinctly neoliberal, or pro-capitalist, but they are still separated by some degree along an economic scale of belief. (For clarity, economic conservative is a neoliberal, pro-capitalist, libertarian, or Republican-leaning, while an economic progressive would be a socialist, communist, or Democrat-leaning.) Most people in the US subscribe to neoliberalism, at least tacitly, and most people in the US also self-identify as Christian, so this is a sizable and important portion, if not a majority, of people.

In direct contradiction to neoliberalism and the economic platform of the Republican Party, the Bible makes numerous clear promulgations for caring for the poor,

stewardship for the environment, and admonishing wealth or riches. Given what the Bible says about these issues, we would expect to see a greater percentage of American Christians who are mobilized against neoliberal capitalism due to its detriments, but this is hardly the case. Instead, what we observe is that American Christians often vote the same way as economic conservatives, Republicans, or libertarians on economic issues.

This is an interesting puzzle, because it does not make sense why these Christians hold the beliefs that they hold. How do we explain why American Christians hold the neoliberal ideology? What will this explanation uncover about the construction of their ideology? How do we characterize the process of ideological construction, shaping, and reinforcement? How is the neoliberal ideology shaped, reinforced, or justified by Christianity? How is the neoliberal ideology repackaged and consumed by a Christian audience? These are fascinating problems that are engaging to political theorists, because understanding the answers to these questions can help provide new perspectives and allow for renewed reflection, paving the way for positive social change.

## **Hypotheses**

### **Alternate Hypothesis #1:**

The religious wing of the Republican party, the religious Right, is motivated to the polls by core group of social issues, about which they have largely cohesive opinions: abortion, gay rights, and evolution. These social issues are often married to neoliberal policies by the Republican Party platform. It is puzzling to understand why it is poorer, or working class, Christians vote against their own economic best interests by voting Republican, but it is easy to understand why a wealthy Christian would support Republicanism; Thomas Frank and Robert Putnam have offered varying explanations.

In trying to explain why it is these poor Christians adopt an economic ideology hostile them, Frank says, in *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, that the reason Christians are focusing more on these hot button social issues can be explained by the backlash movement and backlash theory. This is a very interesting phenomenon in which “cultural anger is marshaled to achieve economic ends” (Frank, 2004, 5).

“While earlier forms of conservatism emphasized fiscal sobriety, the backlash mobilizes voters with explosive social issues –summoning public outrage over everything from busing to un-Christian art –which it then marries to pro-business economic policies....The backlash is what has made possible the international free-market consensus of recent years, with all the privatization, deregulation, and deunionization that are its components.” (Frank, 2004, 5)

The way the neoliberal ideology is advanced here is more sinister: through the formation and manipulation of political coalitions that take advantage of working class people. Frank's theory states that this is merely a strategic alliance within the Republican Party, in which religious conservatives hold their noses and vote for neoliberal policies in exchange for support from libertarians on social issues, but these two groups do not share the same core values –religious or economic. This case study of Kansas is meant as an analogy to be applied to the U.S. as a whole.

## **Alternate Hypothesis #2:**



Putnam explains, in *American Grace*, that rather than seeing Republicans the way that Frank has, that instead more wealthy people are Christian nowadays, so they can have a foot in both camps, and thus have a more cohesive political ideology: they are both religious —motivated on social issues, and wealthy – and thus approve of economic policies that benefit that class. “Really, though, the two wings are largely one and the same. Many of those country clubbers are the Sunday schoolers.” (Putnam, 2010)

Putnam’s theory does not explain why it is that those poorer “Sunday school” Christians support neoliberal economic policies as well as Frank’s.

**My Hypothesis:**

I contend that both conservative Christians and libertarian Republicans share core neoliberal values due to the neoliberal framing of Christianity. Rank and file members of the Religious Right have come to embrace neoliberal policy preferences, and this is due to ideological shaping through a multitude of avenues, one of the most important of which is religious dogma and selection of scripture. Although, libertarian types may still scorn their religious partners in politics, there exists genuine affinity between these two groups on the value basis of neoliberal economic policy. My research explores how one influential religious organization, Focus on the Family, inculcates neoliberal values in religious voters, appealing to the belief systems of conservative Christians. It is the framing, scriptural selection, and spin that allows for a Christian justification of neoliberal ideals. If Christianity is framed the way Focus on the Family is framing it, then neoliberal policy preferences will follow.

I diverge from Frank’s theory in that I find genuine affinity between Christianity and neoliberal capitalism, at least insofar as this religion is being framed in today’s

society. I diverge from Putnam's theory in that I am able to explain why both the "country clubbers and Sunday schoolers" share a similar ideology, and I contend that Frank's explanation is more accurate and descriptive than Putnam's.

## **Theories**

### **Connolly:**

Rather than view things the way Marx, Weber, Putnam, or Frank have, which speaks to a more causally direct hypothesis, I prefer the concept of resonance put forth by William E. Connolly in *Christianity, American Style*, when he describes "the evangelical-capitalist resonance machine":

"...no political economy or religious practice is self-contained.

Particularly in politics these diverse elements infiltrate each other, metabolizing into a moving complex. Spiritual sensibilities, economic presumptions, and state priorities slide and blend into one another, though each also retains a modicum of independence from the others. Causation as resonance between elements that become fused to a considerable degree. Now causality, as relations of dependence between separate factors, morphs into energized complexities of mutual imbrication and interinvolvement, in which heretofore unconnected or loosely associated elements fold, bend, blend, emulsify, and resolve incompletely into each other, forging a qualitative assemblage resistant to classical models of explanation." (Connolly, 2008)

This concept of resonance best captures the relations between neoliberalism and Christianity, and this will be the account of causation that adopted in this paper.

**Smith:**

Adam Smith and other early political theorists relied on a concept or theory called the “state of nature”, which is a representation of life before recorded history. Contrary to contemporary anthropology, Focus on the Family mixes the ideas of Smith and neoliberals of the “state of nature” with the belief in a “fallen” or sinful view of humans. This belief of original sin implies a need for something like Smith’s free market which promises to convert selfish or egoistic behavior into something beneficial, because other humans cannot be trusted because they inherently sinful.

**Hegel:**

Hegel’s notion of religion is that it arose out of human being’s conception of the infinite. The realization that human beings themselves were not capable of perceiving the boundless structure of the universe caused early humans to feel the need to create an infinite consciousness (Pickford, 2013). In the modern world, technology and science have limited human’s conception of what God can possibly be. While many of these social or scientific facts are denied or ignored by most Christians, it is undeniable that it is forcing some Christians to reevaluate the status of their belief. As a result of these challenges to faith, Christians are forced to find another societal force outside of religion, that can be tied back to religion, and that demonstrates some type of infinite knowledge that is both moral and punitive. This translates into a faith in the free market, because the free market is the only just way to interact. This is the desire for imposing excellence Hegel spoke of. American Christians conflate aspects of their religious ideology with their economic ideology under this interpretation of Hegel.

**Marx:**

He has been known as an outspoken atheist, but he does not have such a militant or negative view against religion, as anti-socialists often like to portray. Instead, Marx is simply dismissive of religion and all other elements of ideology, or superstructure. “Morality, religion, metaphysics and all the rest of ideology as well as the forms of consciousness corresponding to these, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter along with this their actual world, also their thinking and the products of their thinking” (Marx, *The German Ideology*, as qtd in Elster 1985). Marx does not just hold religion in disdain, but all aspects of ideology. Religion is not special in this regard. Marx thinks that religion or other aspects of ideology are not significant drivers of history, whereas my theory aligns more with concept of resonance as presented by Connoley, which gives ideology a greater role in the distribution of power.

**Weber:**

Max Weber’s thesis in *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, speaks to one of this paper’s central assumptions: that religious doctrines are selected insofar as they are useful for capitalist modes of production. This describes how religious ideology is formed on the basis of economic ideology, and so Weber is building on the work of Marx here. I add to this body of work, but I place less emphasis on the direct causal relationship, and prefer the concept of resonance provided by Connoley.

**Literature Review**

Understanding the way the Christian-neoliberal ideology is formed has been a point of interest for the following authors, and it occurs through several avenues: through

the Prosperity Gospel and its accompanying contemporary religious literary material, such as study guides, and both fiction and non-fiction books, (Apostolidis, 2010; Bowler, 2013), through Christian talk radio (Apostolidis, 2000), through Christian businesses' advertising and other symbolic shaping (Moreton, 2009; Kintz, 1997), through contemporary media such as television, movies, and NASCAR (Newman and Giardina, 2011), through Christian organizations' literary material, websites, meetings, or seminars, (North, 2013; Peacocke, 2013; SCS, 2013) and through the messages taught from the pulpit. The evidence presented here shows that ideology is a very complex and interwoven concept, and it demonstrates how it can be difficult to tease out specifics.

### **Prosperity Gospel: Bowler, Gutterman, Apostolidis**

Perhaps one of the most profound ways that the neoliberal platform is propounded is through the teaching of the American Prosperity Gospel (Bowler, 2013; Apostolidis 2010; Gutterman, 2010). This phenomenon should be seen as a result of religion adjusting itself to the prevailing economic paradigm, rather than being intrinsically compatible with free market capitalism. Apostolidis characterizes the "...mutually nourishing relation between evangelical conservatism and the global turn toward open markets, free trade, and finance-led accumulation, and away from government regulation, union rights, and social welfare provision" (Apostolidis, 2010, 124). He explains the way the Christian ideology is used to justify or reinforce neoliberalism.

Gutterman, Apostolidis, and Bowler analyze and critique prosperity doctrines propounded by authors and ministers such as Rick Warren, Joel Osteen, Oral Roberts, Jerry Falwell, and Joyce Meyer. Apostolidis claims, "Warren's purpose-driven proselytizing fuels this culture of neoliberalism in obvious ways" (Apostolidis, 2010,

125). This aspect of American evangelicalism is experiencing prolific growth and increase in popularity. The work of the critical analysts of the Prosperity Gospel helps to provide evidence for a generalized theory about the variety of avenues through which the neoliberal platform is repackaged and sold to a Christian audience, and the way Christianity itself is being cast to lay a psychological foundation for the acceptance of neoliberalism. The analysis of the discourse in this area of the Prosperity Gospel helps to explain the way this repackaging process occurs.

### **Apostolidis: Christian talk radio**

For the Christian audience, one of the most important sources of information that goes into ideological formation is through the avenue of Christian right radio programs such as those of James Dobson (Apostolidis, 2000). Paul Apostolidis utilizes the critical theory developed by Theodor W. Adorno of the Frankfurt school, in his book, “Stations of the Cross” to analyze the conservative values propounded during radio broadcasts from Focus on the Family. He makes the argument that the way to remedy the inappropriate marriage between market fundamentalism and religious fundamentalism is through a reinvigoration of the utopian dreams of religion in order to inspire a compulsion to challenge the existing economic-political order and its accompanying lack of true democracy (Apostolidis, 2000). The methodology Apostolidis utilizes is steeped in critical theory and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and this paper employs a similar approach.

### **Kintz: Feminist Theory and Symbolic Shaping**

The widespread acceptance of neoliberalism amongst evangelical Christians is accomplished through construction of social identities, which in turn are formulated

through masculinizations and feminizations of different aspects of economic and religious interaction. The feminist theories highlighted in Linda Kintz's *Between Jesus and the Market: Emotions That Matter in Right-Wing America* demonstrate this type of symbolic construction. She provides evidence that

“...links these religious texts to the work of several secular conservative proponents of the free-market economy, both domestic and global. Here many of the tenets familiar from religious conservatism help shape market fundamentalism by sacrificing certain groups to the purity of the market while displacing attacks on workers, people of color, gays, and lesbians into the abstractions of economic theory” (Kintz, 1997, 4).

Kintz applies a thorough and rigorous feminist twist of CDA to various books, videos, and literature that are distributed in evangelical Christian communities but that escape the scope of analysis for most academics. She shows how the congruence of market and religious fundamentalism are utilized as an argument by secular neoliberals for the advancement of their cause. This process is often a masking of racist, sexist, or xenophobic attitudes under a thin veneer of religious or neoliberal justification. These attitudes can be framed in terms of efficiency of business or even benevolence in the form of tough love from God or powerful countries.

### **Moreton: Wal-Mart**

One of the most important and effective channels through which the neoliberal agenda is propagated operates within Christian businesses (Moreton, 2009). The early founders of the Wal-Mart Corporation utilize and nurture the positive feedback loop that is present between capitalist business and evangelical Christianity. They developed the

Christian-service ethos model, which reinforces the expansive drive of capitalism by emphasizing certain elements of Christianity.

“The prestige of the market in the last decades of the twentieth century grew from multiple sources. Among those were Wal-Mart and the Walton family, which supplied a highly productive laboratory of free-market faith during the 1970s and 1980s. First, through training within the company, Bentonville gradually blended national trends in management theory with the specific needs of its personnel and its core business. When Wal-Mart’s rapid growth and increasing technological sophistication forced the retailer to recruit new managers on college campuses, it turned to the nearby Christian colleges. There faith engaged with the market head-on, decisively shaping both” (Moreton, 2010, 127).

The Walton family’s early development of the Wal-Mart Corporation serves as a good example of how Christianity and neoliberal capitalism can have a mutually nourishing relationship. This corporation has a distilled representation of the neoliberal paradigm: it pays oppressively low wages, lobbies for reduced barriers to trade, and fights the organization of unions.

#### **NASCAR, Newman and Giardina:**

Newman and Giardina use the example of NASCAR culture to demonstrate an arena in which the mutually cultivating ideologies of neoliberalism and Christianity are able to flourish.

“Interestingly, both the Christianity proffered by NASCAR Nation’s merchants of faith and the market logics imposed upon the American



faithful by ideologue-policymakers of the Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek proscribed neoliberal order rely on the same infallible design: that of faith. As capitalists-turned-politicos siphon trillions of tax dollars away from the public good and into private enterprise, Americans are reminded that only through “faith” in the market can the collective body overcome these seemingly ordained downturns and deficits.” (p146).

The introduction of the analogous structure of “faith” in the market with “faith” in God is an important element in the Christian justification of neoliberalism. NASCAR is yet another avenue through which neoliberal values and Christianity meet head-on, and find new ways to reinforce similar ideals.

## **Data and Methods**

### **Data:**

The Truth Project (TTP) is a video series produced and disseminated by Focus on the Family, an evangelical Christian organization that seeks to achieve conservative political and social goals. It is comprised of 13 one-hour lessons. The lessons are usually observed in small-group at-home bible studies in two-hour increments that include a guided discussion after viewing the video. They also maintain a website. Both of these sources of media have high production values, but instead of using information contained within social science academic journals, they rely on religious dogma that frames issues to be in favor of the worldview they are propounding. On the website, they claim the following information as to their reach and level of dissemination.

180,000 Registered Users

3,000,000 Estimated Trained

167 Training Events

44,850 Registered Leaders

100+ Known Countries

1,200 Active Groups

(103,776 “likes” on Facebook)

On Del Tackett’s (see description) blog, this has been updated to say 130 countries and 4-5 million trained. Even if these figures are inflated somewhat, the impact and reach of this organization is staggering.

**Methodology:**

The way in which this exploration will be conducted will be using discourse analysis or discursive analysis. Other authors have employed other techniques that I will borrow from, such Multi-Modal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and content analysis. This methodology involves generalizing the speech patterns, word choice, structure, and content of textual or verbal arguments. It shows how the fabric of ideology is woven. “CDA is empty or meaningless if ideology is absent in it. Ideology is about our worldview, metaphorically our lenses through which we see people, social issues, activities, and events. Generally, it is used to designate our beliefs, values, and constructs our personal principles which guide our daily lives.” (Le and Le, 2009). Discourse changes through time, and this dynamic process involves every idea or piece of language that we consume or integrate.

Discourse shapes our worldview, and so analyzing discourse can be very revealing about why people hold the beliefs they hold. “According to Luke, the outstanding task for CDA is to provide detailed analysis of cultural voices and texts in

local educational sites, while attempting to theoretically and empirically connect these with an understanding of power and ideology in broader social formations and configurations.” (Le and Le, 2009) “The Truth Project” is just such an educational site, and my analysis will show how the Christian worldview comes to be the lens through which they view the world, and how this connects with implications for distribution of power, economic policy preference, and the resulting social configurations. While academics or secularists may see TTP as a site of indoctrination or inculcation, it is not perceived as such by those who are consuming it; instead they view TTP as an academic or educational environment separate from their normal religious learning (see Imagery and Metaphors section).

The methodology of CDA maintains...“the view of language as a means of social construction: language both *shapes* and *is shaped by* society. CDA is not interested in language use itself, but in the linguistic character of social and cultural processes and structures.” (Machin and Mahr 2012) This speaks to the view of resonance that Connoley and I adopt, and that rejects the direct causal view of Marx. Not only is the neoliberal ideology shaping Christianity, but this framing of Christianity is in turn shaping the neoliberal ideology.

## **Analysis**

### **The Setting:**

In the video series, a man dressed in a suit is talking to a full classroom of “students”. He has a table of important looking books and rustic globe. Ethnically and

racially diverse people fill into the classroom.<sup>2</sup> The way the room is set up is reminiscent of a law classroom, with small reading lamps at each spot along the long tables that form an arc around the room. The classroom has a slightly less institutional feel than most modern classrooms, and this more traditional, or older feel, is helpful in instilling values that harken back to some bygone age. Each tier of the stadium seating is full of students, and most footage of the students shows them nodding approvingly or answering questions. The man is made out to be a professor, but unlike a real classroom, the students do not ask questions that challenge his ideas. This shows that this group is already accepting of the speaker's views. Focus on the Family's producers are attempting to utilize a different framing than the normal scene of the pulpit to create a sense of authority or validity that extends beyond the normal realm of religion. The setting of a legal classroom is aimed at establishing credibility in areas (academia and the state) that religion is typically barred from passing judgment on in the US due to most Americans staunch acceptance of separation of church and state, and the education system distancing itself from religion as well.

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<sup>2</sup> It looks as if middle-class, middle-aged, white producers are "trying too hard" to appear racially and ethnically diverse. The significance of this is important, as this means this video is aiming itself at these audiences.



Fig.1 The Classroom

**The Speaker:**

In the first lesson, we meet the speaker. His name is Del Tackett, and his credentials are listed on “The Truth Project’s” website. In addition to holding several degrees and a 20-year tenure in the Air Force, Tackett is a published, highly sought after conference speaker. According to the website, “During the George H. W. Bush administration, he served at the White House, where he was appointed by President Bush as the director of technical planning for the National Security Council.” The focus of this man’s career, and of “The Truth Project,” is to create a “Christian World View”. He was the former president, and the former senior vice president of Focus on the Family, and he is the creator of “the Truth Project.” This illustrious career provides Tackett, as well as TTP, with a high degree of perceived credibility.



Fig 2. Del Tackett

### **Imagery and Metaphors:**

The mystique and trappings of the set give the air of validity. Every detail has been considered. The crowd does appear to average out to be a bit on the younger side compared with an average cross-section of the population, to emphasize the university atmosphere. The “students” are college-aged or a few years older, presumably because this is an “educational” environment, or at least it is perceived as such by those who consume it. The teacher seems to have all the answers to every question imaginable. By this I don’t mean that this whole thing is staged, although it could be, instead what I am saying is that this leader claims directly to have all the information to build a complete worldview. If there is any social, scientific, or political issue that there is some debate in which the Christian community is engaged, not to worry, because God has provided answers for all of this within the bible, and Tackett is here on behalf of Focus on the

Family to tell you exactly what those justifications are. The audience members are obviously not there to challenge the ideas of Tackett, but already accept what he is saying. This video series claims that all the major disputes in science and academia will be settled right before your eyes.

The imagery of the law classroom gives the video a sense of legal and academic credibility, even if it is not endorsed by governmental, judicial, or academic institutions. The makers of this video do not do provide this false sense of validity accidentally, but with intent and purpose. The goal is to convince all those viewing that the claims made in the videos are inerrant. There is no point at which the speaker admits his potential fallibility. This contrasts with any unbiased professor doing their best to the objective arbiter of truth, or at least presenting all sides of an argument. The very language of the title frames the world's problems as a "project" that needs to undertaken only through knowledge of the "truth". The truth here is not what science actually tells us about the problems that this video series brings up, but instead it is an ancient mythology that has been modernized. The whole atmosphere of the video from the outset seems to be one in which social justice is of utmost concern and that it will be addressed head-on. Every sphere of life is going to represented and discussed. Tackett says it will be "A worldview tour", and "Comprehensive and systematic". Issues such as how to deal with poverty and state-run welfare programs, rights to private property, regressive tax rates, tort law reform, and how or whether to redistribute wealth will all be cast in a neoliberal light by TTP. Collective action and mobilization against the state is not presented as a viable solution or even discussed at all, and an important aspect of discourse is what is not stated. The presentation of these issue-positions is sometimes done explicitly, and other

times it occurs more subtly or tacitly. One example of this is the sub-videos that are embedded in Tackett's presentations. These include two classic rhetorical tropes: the expert and the trusted but simple friend. (Machin and Mahr, 2012). One set of videos utilizes "experts" or biblical scholars, and the other has a group of archetypal "everyday people."

In the classroom, off to the left side by the projector screen, there is a physical model of Greek columns, steps, and roofline of a building, each element is labeled with topics and questions that will be asked and answered by this series. There are spheres "that God has given to us" embedded just below the roofline of the mock building. Each sphere is "a picture of the social order that God has prescribed for man." He will explain the negative outcomes that result if man deviates from God's prescription. He will diagnose the pathologies in each sphere. The building metaphor is important to understanding this mythology, because many of the illogical leaps that are going to occur throughout this tour will require bad assumptions that are premises that lead to false conclusions. If these can be visualized as part of a building, then if the pieces are removed, then the building becomes weaker. If enough of these pieces disappear, then the building cannot stand. This physical model is a metaphor or mental devise that helps to construct the narrative being propounded, because every element or part of it is essential to the greater framework's ability to stand up to scrutiny. It makes it more difficult to abandon any one piece.

The fact that classical Greek architecture is chosen rather than a contemporary style suggests the producers are trying to invoke validity of history or of early



philosophy. This architectural style is most often chosen in today's society for governmental, economic, or judicial buildings. It is associated with strength, stability, and security, and has overtones of authority and validity that can be found nowhere else. Greek architecture is known for its ability to instill feelings of overwhelming awe or grandeur. TTP aims to take advantage of these characteristics to give a greater validity to the aspects of their religious platform that they are typically barred from discussing.

An image of a compass is displayed in the presentation slide. The four points of the compass are Truth at top indicated as North, and East and West are Man and God, and to the South is Social order. These are subjects listed in between these four main directions: ethics, philosophy, science, history, labor, arts and media, law, state, family, community, God and man, and church. Tackett claims that there is no area of life that God has not given fundamental answers, and he claims that by combining all of these subject areas with scripture explaining God's intended direction for humans that he will provide an all-encompassing Christian worldview. The direction metaphor helps instill that humans are "lost" without God. The breadth of subjects that appear on the points of the compass shows how ambitious this video series is.

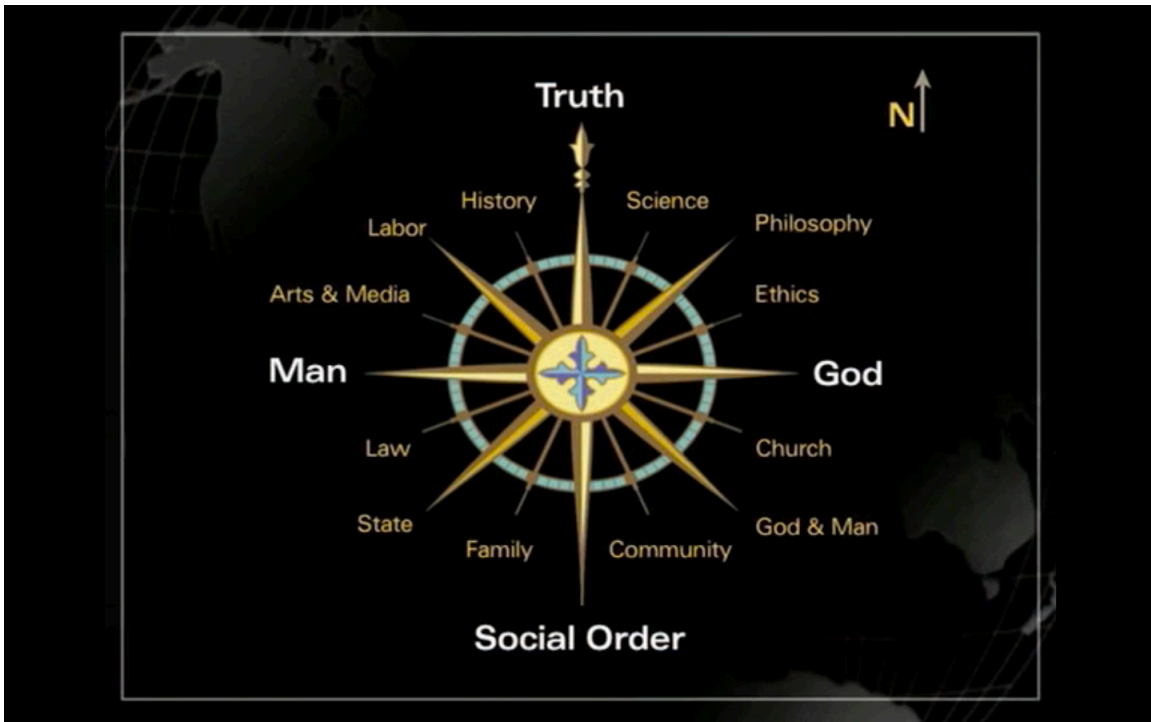


Fig. 3 The Social-Moral Compass

**TTP’s Philosophical Structure:**

What is most interesting about TTP is the way the idea of “truth” is defined. This concept is constructed to say that the Bible is the one and only source of truth, and everything else coming from any other source is not the truth. Tackett quotes 2 Timothy 4:3-4 “...the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.” This verse has an anti-scientific and anti-intellectualist sentiment. The way truth is defined is ironic, considering there is no way to empirically test many of the claims made in the bible, so they can never be verified as “truth”, even according to the definition put forth by Tackett: “that which corresponds to reality.” This conflation of “truth” with what is contained in the bible helps to create feelings of guilt in the abiding Christian for doubts or questions, because if they are questioning any of what is

laid out here, they are questioning God himself, and are therefore sinning by showing a lack of faith. An interesting pattern emerges, and an analogous or parallel structure in the belief system of neoliberalism and the Christian belief system as laid out by Tackett. The guilt that arises from questioning God gets converted to guilt for questioning the free market of the underlying neoliberal economic structure.

The way this transposition of guilt is accomplished is by instilling a belief that God is just and fair, and then the same is said about the free market –that it is just and fair. These two belief systems are parallel. If the Christian begins to have doubts about the fairness in one belief system, they will necessarily be doubting the fairness of the other. If you tug at the thread in one of these systems, the whole thing unravels. Because the underlying neoliberal economic structure is being endorsed by God (within TTP framing), if this system corrupt or flawed, it cannot be because of God’s design, but because of some other factor. The only remedy for a flaw in either system is to maintain faith.

The first video in the series is titled “Veritology: What is truth?” From the outset, this group will try to define the word “truth” in terms of spirituality, which cannot be empirically verified. The lesson is described on the website summary as: “The Truth Project begins by defining truth as ‘that which corresponds to reality.’ This absolute and eternal truth, at the heart of Jesus' mission on earth, continues to be the focal point of the Cosmic Battle in our own time.” This introduction of the “Cosmic Battle” is an essential element upon which this Christian-neoliberal ideology is constructed. It is the Manichean battle of “good vs. evil”, or “us vs. them”. These Christians believe that this battle is *real*, not metaphorical, and this leads to a problematic way of perceiving the

world. This helps lay a groundwork for acceptance of neoliberalism, because it becomes America's duty to help spread good (i.e. Christianity and the American, free-market, way of life) in the world, and this is accomplished through economic "liberation" of poor countries (both economic and religious), and to abolish the "evil" of socialism and the devil. The roots to McCarthyism resonate with this aspect of TTP. This belief in the reality of the Comic Battle is one of many components listed below, and it is important to understand each of them in order to truly see the way in which this ideology is constructed.

### **A Neoliberal Narrative Contrived from Christian Elements:**

There are several sub-narratives that go together to create an entire neoliberal-Christian ideology, and each of these will be revisited and described more fully, but a basic outline of these is as follows:

- 1. Private Property**
  - 2. Decreased Size or Reach of Government**
  - 3. Decreased Taxes, Opposition to Redistribution of Wealth**
  - 4. Individualism and Self-Reliance**
  - 5. Original Sin. Manichean Culture. Cosmic Battle. Liberation vs. Captive**
-

## 1. Private Property

Tackett says most people today do not think that the state has a vested interest in morals or ethics, but he is going to help us discover with this video that the state actually does have this interest. He starts this off by asking the question: “What is stealing?” Even asking the question this way establishes rights to private property. This is a peculiar way of framing the issue of politics and the state, the topic for this lesson. Then, he brings up the issue of whether or not the state is capable of stealing, or if by virtue of being the institution that it is makes it incapable of “stealing” under the conventional notion/definition of the idea. The group comes to the conclusion that the state *is* capable of stealing –based on a gory bible story about a piece of private property, a state official, corruption, murder, and condemnation by God. He critiques a US law that allows the state to take half of a dead man’s property under certain circumstances. The gory bible story is 1 Kings 21, and it is about the king Ahab, his wife Jezebel, who overtook the property of the vineyard owner, Naboth, who is stoned to death in order to seize his property.

This is a lesson for a Christian view of the government, and of private property. This helps to lay the groundwork for the neoliberal ideology. Private property is established as a natural, God-given right, which the state threatens. There is conveniently no mention of the fact that private property cannot exist at all without state regulation, as in Locke. It also is problematic for socialist takeovers of privately owned firms, or for the government to take over or regulate certain aspects of a market, such as providing public utilities or education. Under this mentality, the market will reign supreme as a proxy for God’s judgment, because of the parallel structure of these belief systems.

The way this lesson is being cast, of a supreme morality above and beyond the laws of the state, that condemns the state for any takeover of any asset will prove problematic in the future, as the climate and labor crises are addressed. This could be either God or the free-market. This is much different than other lessons taught in the bible where Jesus dismisses the merits of private property. In fact, these lessons could speak to/justify the need to socialize certain sectors of the economy. Instead, what we see here is a worldview that emphasizes the role of private property over power of the state. This prevents progress of society, which will be unable to address certain crises under the current economic regime that is glorified by this Christian institution.

## **2. Decreased Size or Reach of Government**

Throughout the series, Tackett says the phrase, “The king who thinks he is God soon becomes the Devil.” This is not a specific biblical passage, so Tackett must have made it up to sound like scripture to suit his purposes. He says it over and over again throughout various episodes to reinforce his ideology. He uses scripture and interpretations or explanations of it that speak to the neoliberal idea of a reduced size of government. This idea is developed more broadly in the earlier episodes, and then in later ones, it is given some specific details.

Tackett uses a bible story that constructs a narrative that claims that the state is not the supreme authority over delegation of land, but that God is. This is the story of Nebuchadnezzar (Neb), in Daniel Ch. 4. Neb was king and had a dream. None of the wisemen could interpret it. Daniel came and explained that it meant that if Neb did not recognize that God reigned supreme over kings, that he would be banished and “forced to

eat grass like cattle.” God took away Neb’s royal authority, because God needs acknowledgement that he can give the land to anyone he wishes. Tackett asks the crowd: “Now the question is: who is really in control here?” The class responds resoundingly (as expected): “God, God, God.” He says the king of Babylon thought he was in charge, that he had created/built all this. He was driven away/banished. At the end of the banishment period, Neb comes back around and accepts God. The scripture says: “my sanity was restored.” The reference to insanity is used again here, as a way of further instilling what is “truth” and what isn’t. This speaks to the idea that people will not acknowledge the power of the state, but that they believe that authority lies elsewhere.

The purpose of this story is to warn against an increase in the power of the state, and Tackett will describe this later when he discusses the fall of Rome and the Rise of the State. He says that when the “king” (a stand-in for the government) begins to take control over other spheres, that he becomes the devil. This is a neoliberal call for the decreased size of government to a bare-bones institution that is not allowed to interfere in the other “spheres”; otherwise it will make God angry. If the government tries to regulate the other spheres, then it is interfering with God’s will or plan for those spheres. This group of Christians views this interference as the work of the devil. This creates a powerful religious justification for a neoliberal narrative of a reduced reach of government, and this also helps to justify the way the market can reign as a proxy for God’s judgment.

Tackett then moves on by saying, “This raises an interesting question: is the king sovereign over every other sphere?” He has a slide with all the spheres represented.

(family, church, God & man, labor, state, community). He reads several scriptures that remind kings that God is sovereign over them. Then he says,

“Is the state sovereign over the rest of these social institutions? This question is a question that Abraham Kuyper dealt with, and he crafted a term called “sphere sovereignty.” Let me explain what that means. Sphere sovereignty in essence means that if God created each of these spheres for a purpose. He designed them, he created the members, the roles and the responsibilities, and why they exist. Then Kuyper’s position was this: that means that these other spheres are sovereign in that purpose, that doesn’t mean that they are sovereign in the way that we mean ‘sovereign of God,’ but in their sphere of what God has created them to do, they are sovereign. So, the question here is whether or not the state, then, in its role and responsibility has sovereign rule and control over these others.”

This plays to the neoliberal distrust in the extended reach of government in the form of welfare programs, redistributive taxes, or environmental or labor regulation. It says that the current reach of government is unjust based on biblical principles and God’s authority (according to Abraham Kuyper and his concept of sphere sovereignty.) Kuyper is not discussed any further, nor are any other theories of democracy, it is simply assumed from this point forward that this is the best political theory. They will perceive that their actions in one sphere do not affect the other. They may also perceive that these elements of society should be sovereign, when allowing them this may create other societal problems. The government needs to be able to regulate aspects of these various spheres to protect its citizens from one another. They should not be discrete categories, but rather



acknowledge that there is going to be some overlap between them. This combined with the Manichean view of culture undermines mutual understanding.

Tackett says, “we are going to look at one more story, and read God’s perspective on what it means for the king to begin to assume that he has authority over another sphere.” This is continuing to set up the bounds that the state is to maintain, and Tackett’s story will be serve to reinforce the Christian-neoliberal ideology. It helps to maintain a groundwork so that as other neoliberal elements are added in, compounding the nuance of this worldview, the listener has these stories and justifications to fall back on. This story is 2 Chronicles 26, and it is about the 16 year old boy king named Usiah. “He did everything right in God’s eyes, but then one day he tried to burn incense in the church (which he was not allowed to do) and God was angry and punished him with leprosy. He had it until the day he died, and he lost his rule. He lived in separate house and was excluded from the temple. He was buried close to, but not with his family. Usiah was punished because he tried to practice the role that was delegated by God only to priests. This is a lesson about how important the idea of sphere sovereignty is to God.” (paraphrased summary of passage). This is using a religious justification for the neoliberal idea of a decreased size and role of the state, and how it is better if it is not allowed to interfere in the other spheres.

Continuing to build this idea that a reduced size of government is advantageous, and that it’s primary role should be to oversee just exchange, and to punish those who violate this, Tackett says, “Well, lets look at this next one: purpose. What is the purpose of the state? What did we see in Romans chapter 13. What do we find here? What is the purpose of the civil authority? Do you remember what it said?” He gives the response:

“Number one: to punish evil.” Tackett makes many references to a federal government that is too large, and that provides too many social services. He calls it a monster or behemoth. He is trying to create a Christian-neoliberal ideology that resonates well with the Republican Party and US conservatism with this emphasis of certain scriptures.

### **3. Decreased Taxes, Opposition to Redistribution of Wealth:**

Tackett makes repeated references to the fact that God has designed this sphere with a particular order in mind. He says, "What we are interested here is to understand what this sphere looks like. What kind of design has God implemented into this social system?" A number of scriptures are then presented on how God is sovereign over kings. While discussing 1 Samuel 8, Tackett makes a conservative reference to taxes, and how bad it is that taxes are so high. He says sarcastically: “Now, I know this is probably hard for you to imagine, that the state would take 10%.” It is assumed that the crowd would like lower taxes (who wouldn't?) but this is presented in a casual, joking type of manner, as if it is assumed that everyone in the audience advocates for lower taxes. This is a major part of the Republican Party platform and central ideal of the neoliberal ideology. His joking, sarcastic tone shows how sensitive this subject really is.

In 1 Samuel 8, the question being asked by Tackett is “Why did Israel ask for a king?” The story says the people of Israel wanted to do away with the “judges” in favor of a king or monarchy. Here is what could be a bible lesson for mobilization of social movements to overthrow a corrupt government, but the spin gets put on a different way. They wanted a change of leadership. He says Israel asked for a king because of the corruptness of the judges. He explains the scripture as saying that God would grant them

a new form of government, but he is prophesizing the way that this will unfold. He says it is a warning. It is then explained to the people that the new king will take over everything and enslave the people.

This story from 1 Samuel 8 sounds horrible, with lots of chariots, military engagement and sacrifice, agricultural enslavement, and the first fruits that belong to God will now go to the king. Tackett says, “The first fruits. Who do they belong to? God. This guy is now going to demand what is God’s. And what is he going to do with them? Redistribute those.” This is a blatant reference to the disdain of redistributive taxes, a core element of the neoliberal ideology.

In addition to being a lesson about redistributive taxes, this story from Samuel is another lesson for government with too far of reach. He repeatedly says that the government can become a behemoth monster that is out of control of the people. This is an attempt to construct one aspect of the neoliberal narrative: reduction in the size of government to the barest essentials: to protect private property rights, to oversee just exchange, and to provide a punitive/disciplinary apparatus. These roles of the government are clearly propounded by the way these bible stories are cast, and the stories that are chosen or selected.

Instead of emphasizing other stories about taking care of the poor, or fighting back against a corrupt government, which are prolific themes found in the bible, these revolutionary ideals or concerns for the oppressed are not emphasized here. Instead, we are made to think that no government can be perfect, and so we are to simply accept this one. It is important to distinguish here that this acceptance or conformity is implied only when the conservative party is in power, but when the liberal party is in power, Tackett is

teaching them to fight back against them for spreading a sinful culture. This is the provision of religious justification for political mobilization for a particular ideology, which is Focus on the Family's vision.

This passage from Samuel being framed this way is a poignant example of the neoliberal distrust in the extended reach of government. This could be a lesson about overthrowing corrupt governments or addressing exploitation. If it was framed this way instead, then this scripture could be used by oppressed religious minorities in other countries to secure their rights in coups against corrupt regimes. Or this lesson could be interpreted to be a positive one about modern governance, and how far we have or have not come since this time and place being examined. Instead this story is made into a metaphor that equates modern democracy with a monarchy, and how God reprimands those governments that grow to be too big. The use of the "king" in place of democratic government shows the way this story is being cast in a neoliberal light, because it implies that the governing body is not accountable to the polity. This might seem harmless, but it is in fact very powerful for creating distrust in government and the democratic process to address injustices.

This distrust in government to grow too large, and to extend to be a behemoth, is a very telling bible story that is being used as evidence to mobilize against socialized services such as state-run healthcare, Medicaid, Medicare, or unemployment insurance benefits. There is a narrative created that blames lazy, worthless, drug-addicted, poor people for sucking the system dry. They are perceived/portrayed as immoral for needing help from the state, because if these people were right with God, and in the right church, they would be taken care of by their friends in the church. The evidence for this is

mostly contained in the “everyday people” cut scenes that portray the “trusted but simple friend” motif, and also in the “expert” cut scene videos. More importantly, there is a narrative created that says if we allow the state to address the concerns of poor people, we are violating the social structure that has been ordained by God. This is all going on while issues like the excessive military budget is left alone, or large corporations using government officials as a handmaiden, passing legislation that does nothing to address inequality or the effects of climate change. The way in which this bible lesson is framed is in no way questioned by the group, and no real discussion of the bible passage ensues. The leader makes his point and moves on.

Neoliberalism creates a need for the church because some private institution has to take over philanthropic concerns, so these adherents to Christianity are creating a need for themselves by supporting neoliberalism. Neoliberals think the welfare concerns that plague nations today can be done away with if the philanthropic leanings of the average consumer were only allowed to blossom, unconstrained by taxes, and a Christian justification of these principles is being provided by TTP. A lower tax rate for church members would have obvious benefits for churches, as people have more money freed up that they can now do what they have always wanted to do with it: support addressing concerns for the needy through church exclusively. This is an important turf battle between government and Christianity, that neoliberalism serves to benefit the church. They must create a need for themselves in order to get adherents to tithe.

Tackett moves back into talking about “spheres”. This is meant to mean “realm” or “domain” or rightful social/philosophical territory. He discusses who has dominion, or control, over the various “spheres”. He has physical spheres to represent these concepts.

He asks, “What does this sphere [the state] look like?” He draws a circle on the board and asks, “What should we put in this sphere?” Responses are “a king” and “God”. Tackett says, “God has placed himself in this sphere, and there is a reason for it. This sphere can become the most terrible monster of all.” This is another example of a narrative being constructed here of skepticism of a government that provides too many services, or has too much reach, and providing a religious justification of this idea. It is a plea to reduce the size, reach, or services of government, and this will manifest itself in the form of rollback economic or labor regulation, or a reduction in welfare spending, all in line with the neoliberal model. These policy prescriptions are not stated explicitly by Tackett at this time, but instead come later as other elements of this worldview are developed, especially the reduction in social services. Tackett does this by calling the government “the most terrible monster of all”.

Later on, in the episode on labor, many of the more vague presentations of these neoliberal concepts that have been repeatedly driven home at this point in the series are presented more clearly. Tackett cites some passages from Exodus, Chapter 20 (see fig.4 and 5), but he puts a neoliberal spin on them. He describes society as becoming covetous, and using these scriptures that admonish stealing, he brings up “class envy”, “excessive/oppressive/improper taxation”, and “demand for ‘redistribution’ rights”, or “forced ‘redistribution’ of wealth”. He says, “we live in a culture today that is continuing to try to foster covetousness. Envy. I want what you have.” You can tell by his tone that it really makes his blood boil to have to pay taxes, or that poor people want to make more money or receive benefits or aid from the government. This is the clearest example of neoliberalism being given scriptural justification, and Tackett puts quite a bit of spin on

these passages to make it work, but in the context of everything else he says, this piece of the neoliberal-Christian narrative fits in nicely.

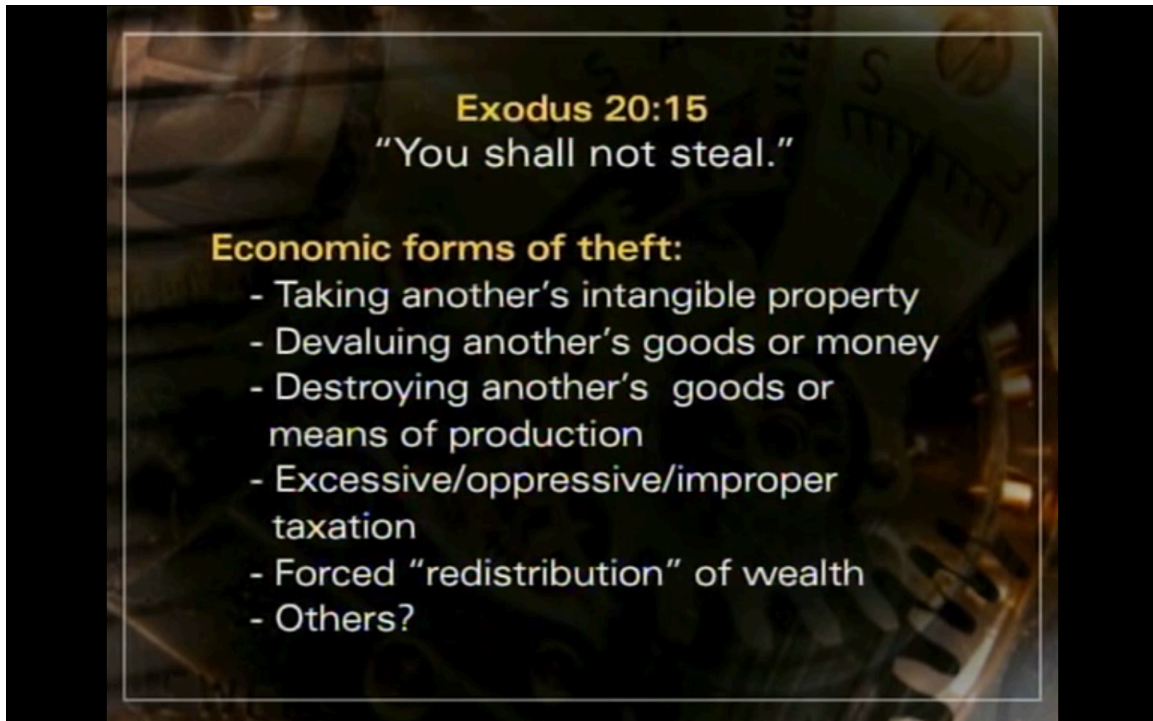


Fig. 4

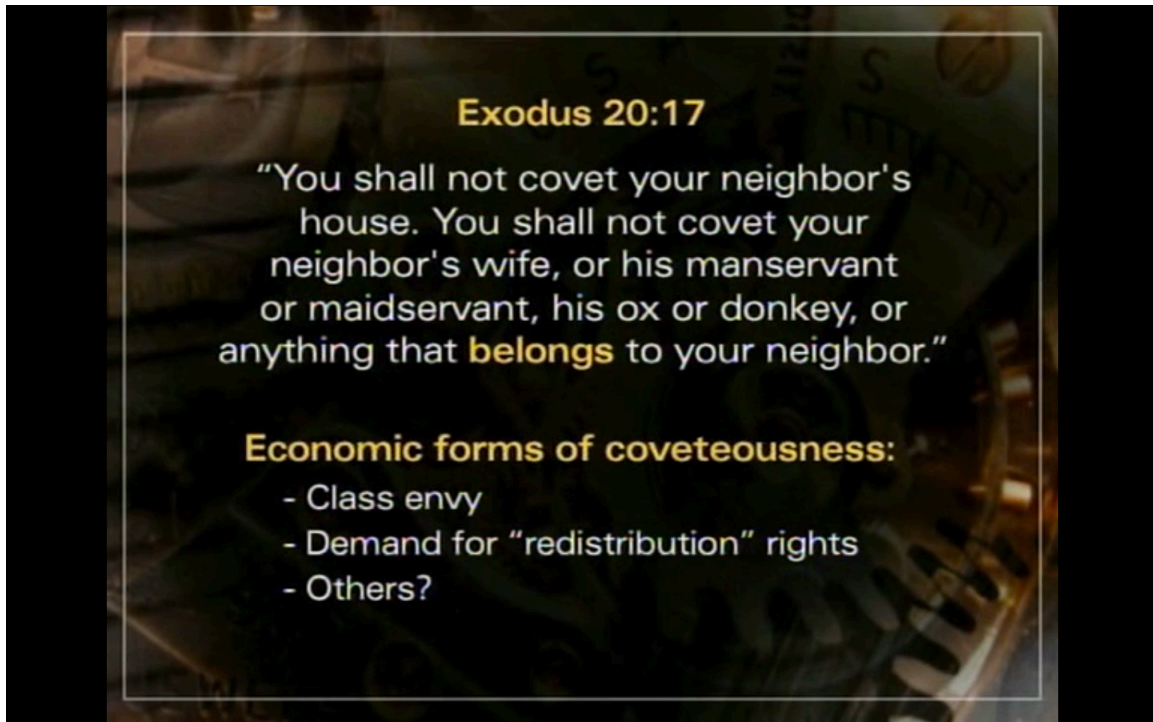


Fig. 5

#### **4. Individualism and Self-reliance:**

When Tackett does finally address the issue of taking care of the poor, he makes it very clear that this is not the responsibility of the state. He says that this is left to the sphere of labor to take care of those who are poor, specifically the employers or “job creators”. He cites scripture that mentions leaving grapes on the ground after the harvest for poor people to come pick up. He emphasizes that they are not picking the grapes up and then giving them away. This is framed as a story that claims it is better to provide aid with strings attached. The poor person must work for their aid, and not be given a “hand-out”. There is a fixation on the laziness of the poor, and as if aid that is provided is given so that the poor can choose to no longer work. This harkens back to the welfare myth of Ronald Reagan, in which the poor are poor because they are morally flawed. It



shows how out-of-touch Tackett is with the lives of most poor people, who do work and still need welfare assistance to survive.

In the context of the “Cosmic Battle”, Tackett displays a slide called “antithesis”, and he sets up some binary views of the world



Fig. 6 “A Battle of Worldviews”

The “most” neoliberal of these narratives is the Roles vs. Jealousy concept. “If God declares and designs in social order, for example, that there are roles. How does the world respond? Jealousy. (Tackett’s tone then changes to aggressive) I will not play that role.” From this view, there are makers and shakers, wealth producers and leaders, more or less ordained by God, and then there are the poor people who don’t have an important role or any hope of making it. It also reinforces a mentality that it is ok for some to be poor, while others are excessively rich, something Jesus would have hated very much, if he existed. There is a great deal of scripture that rejects wealth, but this is something that is

not brought up or emphasized. This is a core principle about the application of Critical Discourse Analysis: what is NOT being said is just as important.

Instead, Christians here are being coached that it is acceptable to have great wealth disparity. This is demonstrated by the glorification of the current neoliberal system as seen in episode 11- Labor: Created to Create: “We are going to find that it is a *glorious* social system that God has given to us. Why? Because in reality God has created us to create.” He is referencing the status quo of a neoliberal capitalistic structure. Later in episode 11, Tackett glorifies the role of CEO’s and large corporations as the job creators and wealth producers of society. The concept of “roles” in society in this context is quite oppressive to women and minorities, because if those who have a “role” of a poor person are “jealous” of another’s wealth, we are resisting God’s plan and being sinful.

“If God declares that we are responsible for our actions, the world responds with blame. It’s not my fault, it must be somebody else’s fault.” This re-emphasizes the individualism/self-reliance narrative of neoliberalism that downplays circumstance, institutional oppression, or reliance on family, friends, community, or the state as a viable means for self-advancement. Any acceptance of help from anyone but from those ordained by God to give it (the church exclusively) is portrayed as immoral or unfairly burdening or relying others. For the sake of job security or self-interest, the Christian church has a stake in advancing the lack of state-run charity promoted by neoliberalism. “That’s why we get a woman who can sue McDonalds for millions of dollars. Why? Because she spilled a cup of hot coffee in her lap. It must not be her fault, right? We live in a culture of blame!” This demonstrates resentment towards the current status of tort law, and of judgments against corporations for harming people. It also places emphasis

on personal responsibility that downplays the role of community and family, and virtually everything beyond the individual. This takes away the role of situation or conditions, such as poverty, which can be absolutely stifling and paralyzing economically, no matter how strong the person is. Core parts of the neoliberal ideology are being constructed here: a push towards privatization of aid, and thus a rollback of state-run welfare programs; a promotion of acceptability of wealth disparity; and a push towards tort reform.

TTP also emphasizes individualism and self-reliance (and thus a lack of reliance on state run social programs) by instilling the idea that “skills and abilities to work come from God.” This implies that if one is not skilled or not able to work, that they are somehow not moral or right with God. This casts poor people in a negative light, as it is their fault if they are poor because they are morally depraved. It downplays the role of education, practice, perseverance, or receiving help or aid in favor of faith or prayer. The scripture cited for this comes from Exodus chapter 35.

##### **5. Original Sin. Manichean Culture. Cosmic Battle. Liberation vs. Captive**

Having a belief in the original sin changes a person’s worldview. Contrary to an optimistic vision of humans and for their future, this belief encourages a very negative view of humanity. This part of the myth combined with other elements creates a people who are apathetic about global issues such as widespread poverty and inequality, or oppression. This is because anyone who is poor is poor because of moral failings, and those who are rich are so because they are virtuous. A belief in judgment after death also de-emphasizes the role of poverty because Christians can simply believe that if a morally

just person is poor that their reward is waiting for them in heaven. Such is the problem with the view of original sin, and the need to complete certain steps for salvation. This gets translated into a market context: you must complete certain steps if you want to be successful. This downplays the role of poverty or circumstance. This is seen in the “everyday people” cut-scene in the episode on labor: “God will provide, but not those who are unwilling to try and provide for themselves.”

Tackett cites a verse that says “Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.” He asks the audience to carefully consider what this implies. “That there *are* sides.” He leans into this word physically and verbally, as if he is declaring it to be reality. He mentions that this creates a division in, or bifurcates, the world. This type of hierarchical or binary thinking has been implicated in many global social problems by various feminist authors (Peterson and Runyan, 2010; Hawkesworth 2006, Cockburn 2007). He then says “This doesn’t play well in our *tolerant* world, right?” [he has disdain in his voice when he stretches out the syllables of this word]. “This idea of there being *sides*? Why can’t we all just get along?” [he air-hugs an imaginary small, round person in front of him]. He holds disdain in his voice again when he says this old cliché. It is as if he can’t wait to unleash his hatefulness upon those who are different from him, because he views them as all that is wrong in the world. He explains that there are two sides: the side/spirit of truth and the side/spirit of falsehood and lies. This way of thinking about the world leaves no room for gray-area. Everything is black and white. This is much different than engaging in an academic debate over social or political issues. In this case, there are strictly two sides, and one is the truth, and the other is a lie. This is unscientific and a very problematic way of viewing the world. He says we will call the two sides “the

cosmic battle” (a diagram appears depicting truth/reality vs. lie/illusion, see Fig. 6). This undermines attempts at mutual understanding, and contributes to close-mindedness.

This theme of the cosmic battle comes up again and again, and it underlies what is going on in the world for those who accept this view. Every element, every person in the world is fighting for one of two sides, regardless of their knowledge of this supernatural battle between good and evil that is going on behind the scenes, but that is a real, physical battle, not a metaphor. If this view is accepted, it makes it even harder to tear someone away from this spiritual ideology. This battle of good and evil fits well into the neoliberal narrative, because it promotes a need for a strong military, it also justifies interventions. This is combined with the liberation/captive narrative to create a need for the US to act as the world police, and to “liberate” people in other countries from “oppressive” economic structures. This is shown in the episode on “the American Experiment” in which the US is glorified as a beacon on the hill for other nations to look up to. Tackett is directly promoting the Washington Consensus here: if only other nations liberalized their markets, then they would be able to develop and become wealthy like the US. This shows the imperialistic nature of neoliberalism, masked by a moral mission that has been religiously justified.

The cosmic battle or bifurcation of the world casts everything that is good or truth as a representation of God and Christianity, and everything else is Satan or a representation of evil. This perhaps one of the more ironic and hypocritical aspects of this video series, because of the number of falsehoods it attempts to put forth. This type of religion would be truly evil if held to its own definition of such concepts. An important connection is established next: the link between truth and lies to salvation.

There are more references to the underlying battle and issues of truth and salvation, further building the pro-militaristic aspect of American neoliberalism. He shows a slide titled “connecting sin, lies, and deceit” with supporting scriptures describing how this deceitful nature is fundamental to humans. He says, “I am convinced folks, that every sin that besets us. *Every* sin that besets us, can be traced back fundamentally to the belief in a lie. That’s why this battle is so huge.” These lies will later be described as anything that contradicts with the worldview presented here.

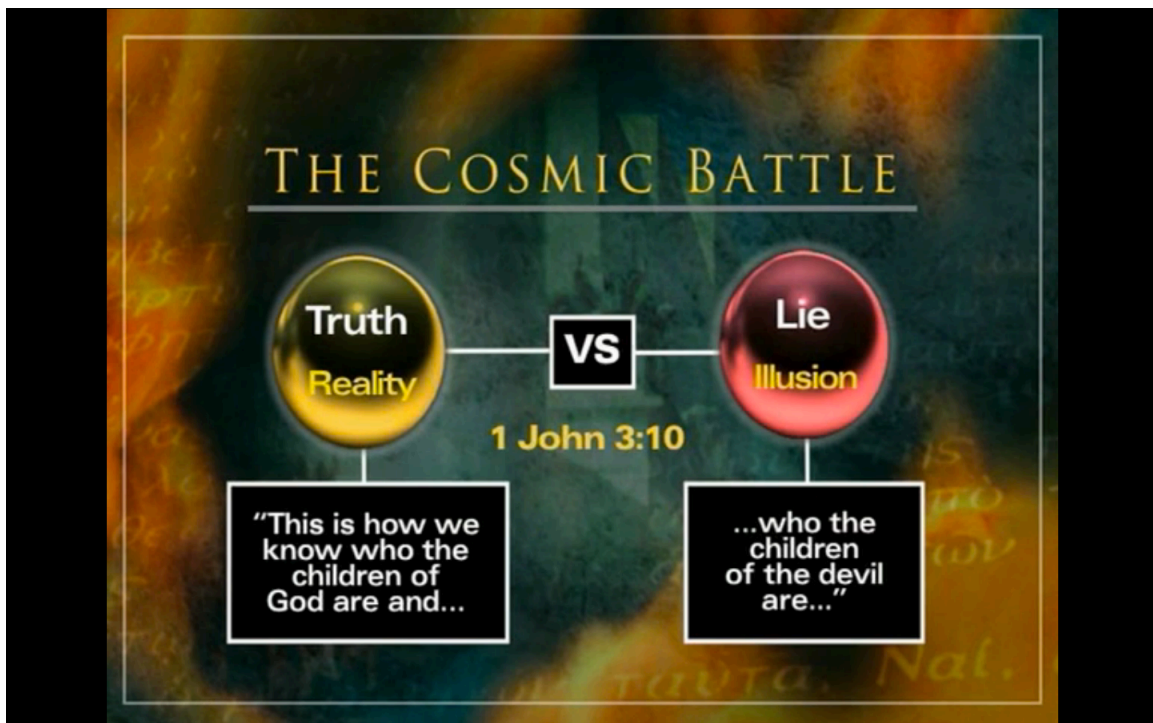


Fig.7 The Cosmic Battle

The notion of this cosmic battle underlies all imperialistic and interventionist tendencies of neoliberalism. Tackett asks, “How do we deal with the outsiders? Let there be no mistake,” (2 Timothy 2:24-26) he says the name of the verse and reads it. “The Lord’s servant must gently instruct his opponents...in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the **truth**, and that they will come to their

senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them **captive** to do his will.” (original emphases) He asks a student to say “captive”. This “come to their senses” part really puts emphasis on the individual, not the group or circumstance. This is the narrative of individualism and self-reliance being interwoven with the captive/liberation narrative. “That is what we must come to realize, and recognize, and *picture* outsiders to be. *Captive!*” (original emphasis) “Picture them in POW clothes” (holds hands across body as if in handcuffs, or perhaps very cold). This promotes a misguided view of those who are poor, because it casts them as “unsaved” or in need of salvation. This theme that the poor are immoral or un-Christian is not stated explicitly, but is drawn from a variety of concepts exposed by this analysis.

This notion of captives continues to be expanded: “We are going to continually to look at this cosmic battle, but when we look at *those* who stand *opposed* to God’s truth. We do not view them (shakes head side to side) with an arrogant attitude. We view them as *captives!* (excited hushed whisper). And that is what we were.” This framing of other people of the world who are not like them as “others” and “captives” who need to be set free creates groundwork for interference in the affairs of other nations, such as the spread of neoliberal ideals. This combined with the sword and shield references, they are already laying a very evident groundwork for acceptance of military engagement, heroism, and glorification of war. It creates groundwork for acceptance of US imperialistic economic policies as well. This bloated military and stripped down economic regulation is very characteristic of American neoliberalism. This view of captives as those who are not yet “saved” by God displaces what could be genuine efforts to aid the poor to making sure they are “right with God” before the aid is distributed.

This applies both domestically and internationally, and this message of conditional aid or love is reiterated over and over again throughout TTP, despite the protestations that God's love is unconditional that would result if this claim is presented to believers.

Tackett says: "The battle hasn't changed. It is the same battle that began with Satan laying out his truth claim: 'You will not surely die. You will be like God.' And therein lies one of the most pernicious lies of the world. It is all about you, babe." (points at crowd). "What we really see here is an antithesis (underlines with arms) between of the truth claims of God, and the, the lies, the illusions of the world, the flesh, and the devil." Tackett speaks about the physical world as if it is full of illusions. This is ironic, considering the physical world is the world without illusions, and illusions are often thought of as a supernatural manifestation. This separation between what we can attempt to know about the physical world as a lie, and that the only true world being completely invisible to all known methods of perception and instrumentation is an insult to all scientists and those who pursue knowledge and actual truth. The "all about you, babe" part of Tackett's quote makes Christians feel guilty about being a part of this physical world, as if the world itself is inherently flawed, and the physical bodies we inhabit implicate us in these flaws. This spills over into any other aspect of the physical world. Adherents of Christianity are being indoctrinated into a deep suspicion of all things scientific by these remarks, and this is very problematic when these Christians allow these supernatural beliefs to inform their political or social choices.



## **Conclusion**

This in-depth analysis of The Truth Project reveals the way one influential religious organization attempts to inculcate neoliberal beliefs in its adherents. By emphasizing and focusing on the scriptures that have been chosen by TTP, Christianity is made to reinforce neoliberal economic policies. By showing what scriptures are emphasized and the framing in which each are presented, I have revealed the underlying neoliberal ideology embedded within this Christian doctrine, thus demonstrating that one important aspect of ideological formation is through the selection, emphasis, and framing of religious dogma. I have demonstrated the main themes that are used to support this neoliberal-Christian justification. I have also revealed through the concept of resonance that the causal arrow can be reversed, and neoliberal beliefs can come to be shaped by Christianity.

The avenues through which the Christian ideology is shaped to be inline with the neoliberal ideology is more direct in both my thesis and that of the authors who analyzed the Prosperity Gospel, while these avenues are more indirect when examining the analysis of NASCAR and Wal-Mart (their advertising, memes, or motifs), or other sources of media. What is puzzling is the fact that the less direct avenues seem to be more widely accepted because of their mainstream role, likely because of the simplicity of their message as compared with the explicitly religious messages. However, the neoliberal messages justified on religious terms take deeper root psychologically and are taken more seriously by those who adhere to them than those ideologies that are identified with through mainstream media.

I have tried to answer the question why it is that Christians come to hold the neoliberal ideology, and to some degree, I have: because of the selection and emphasis of dogma as laid out by TTP, and through the numerous avenues outlined in the literature review. However, this question is also the one that is left most unanswered by the field. The producers at Focus on the Family have their reasons for professing these neoliberal beliefs: Perhaps they truly believe neoliberal capitalism is the ideal system for addressing social woes? Perhaps they are being encouraged or coached to do this by wealthy donors? Perhaps this is a political strategy aimed at creating a cohesive ideology for the Republican Party? Perhaps someone else is pulling the strings? It is difficult to make these conjectures because of the unavailability of data to support this. However, answering these questions would yield great insight in further answering the “why” question, and would be a worthy pursuit for additional research.

While my research does not go beyond the analysis of neoliberal elements contained within this one example of Christian ideology, and thus does not answer certain aspects of the “why” question all that well, it was able to answer my other research questions with satisfaction. It also uncovered some unexpected, unsavory, and disturbing results. The Christian ideology, when framed as TTP has, is based on a great deal of sexism, homophobia, militarism, xenophobia, nationalism or patriotism, imperialism, racism, and a general distaste for those different than them. My research uncovered much more violent tendencies, anger, distrust, and anxiety than I had expected. Given the evidence that neoliberalism masks these feelings and has been used to justify violence; one has to wonder what elements of Christian ideology are making it into neoliberalism. This is important to consider when keeping in mind the concept of resonance on part of

libertarian-minded Republicans or other neoliberals who wish to distance themselves from their religious counterparts, as the concept of resonance would suggest that, despite their desire to remain separate from their religious counterparts, these ideals will travel both directions, and neoliberals will find themselves adopting some of these ideologically Christian elements.

All of the authors in the literature review have revealed that making characterizing generalizations about the construction, reformation, and reinforcement of ideology is notoriously difficult, and that is why case studies such as this are often the best tool. This limits the ability to apply the analysis to a larger group. However, overall, ideology and ideological construction seems to be more rooted in emotion than in reason or logic. It plays to our subconscious, and when we are not on-point and thinking critically, those emotional-automatic processes are ready to take over. Those in a position to shape ideology in their favor take advantage of this with heuristic devices that make thinking about complex issues much easier. The Christian ideology, like all others, has found specific heuristic devices to utilize, and there is a great deal of overlap with the particular devices and way of thinking in both Christianity and neoliberalism. Given the range of swinging emotion presented in TTP, Tackett easily takes advantage of these emotional states of mind, overriding critical or rational thought.

While the generalized theory I have just described is limited, my description of how this neoliberal ideological reinforcement out of Christian elements occurs in TTP has been detailed. While my research struggled to answer the root of the “why” question, I was able to demonstrate the complex web of interwoven concepts rooted in Christian doctrine that justify or reinforce neoliberalism. I showed how a neoliberal narrative

centered around dismantling social welfare programs, deregulation, and strong private property rights has been justified by selection, emphasis and framing of various scripture. These are certainly shared elements between TTP's interpretation of scripture and with other versions religion or faith, and my research could be extrapolated to apply to these other demographics that, at least in part, share these values. Given the widespread acceptance of both neoliberal capitalism and Christianity, this research has the potential to describe a sizeable portion of the US population, if not a majority.

The best model of generalized characterization of Christian-neoliberal ideological formation would describe the most powerful actors or people who make decisions about selection of scripture and messages portrayed in the mainstream media. This model would follow the money trail and see who is in control of these decisions, and would reveal the web of power of the main people who push the neoliberal-Christian ideology on the public, like the Koch brothers or the Bush family. This model would be able to describe why more indirect avenues are more successful at establishing congruence between these seemingly dissimilar ideologies among a greater population, but also explain why the selection, emphasis and framing of scripture becomes more entrenched. This model would thus be able to describe the way in which these avenues interact or feedback off of one another.

Most of the time Tackett's position on the Bible seems like a real stretch, or that he contorting the main thrust of the arguments and moral lessons presented in it to be framed in a neoliberal lens; less often it is easier for him to justify neoliberalism letting scripture stand alone. He is taking what is, on the whole, more of a socialist document, and turning it into a justification for capitalism. The fact that so many Christians accept

what Tackett is claiming should speak to the power of discourse in ideological shaping (and this should also speak to the ignorance of masses of Christians with regard to their knowledge of the fundamental lessons outlined in their own sacred text!), because if a religious document that says the complete opposite of what it is being used to justify, what else can ideological shaping do? It can have either very positive or very negative effects, and that is why being aware of ideological processes is so important, and continuing to understand more about the process of ideological construction is a pursuit worthy of more research.

Building a more complete picture of understanding of how ideology is constructed, reinforced, shaped, or justified adds to the existing body of research initiated by early critical theorists. New insights into this can tell us things about ourselves and about society that we did not fully grasp before. By providing analysis such as this, I add to the richness of academia and of critical theory of ideology. This particular project can help reveal weaknesses in the congruent system of neoliberal-Christian ideology, and add to the material from which to pull from for those who wish to resist the dangerous conflation of these two ideological frameworks.

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