

# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

This book is about slavery and Jesus' gospel of liberation. Both topics have an enduring relevance. Slavery is a theme that runs throughout history - a fact that is worth paying attention to. When examining the issue of slavery today, the focus will be on "the state" and its role in "penal slavery." The particular state this book focuses on is the United States of America.

"The state" is short for "the nation-state." Since the U.S.A. consists of a union of fifty individual states there are a few times in this book when "the state" (or "states") will mean one (or more) of the fifty individual states. The context of its usage should make it clear when it refers to individual states in the U.S.A.

In this book "the state" basically means "the government" (which includes all levels of government in a nation). It means the government, all its agencies, and all its employees (or agents). The state is a human-devised political organization. The state is a power structure that rules over the population in a well-defined territory. The world is divided up into many nation-states. In different states the government takes different forms. But all states are human-devised, human-operated, political organizations.

In this book the state will be viewed critically. Despite its many valuable social services the state will be viewed as an *oppressive institution*. This book presents the view that the oppressive nature of the state transcends social services, individual politicians, political parties, or any particular administration. The state is essentially an oppressive organization regardless of who is in office, who are the state's employees, and how many valuable social services it provides.

This oppressive nature of the state will be developed in each chapter and will be related to the theme of slavery.

There are less critical and more positive ways to view the state. One understanding of “the state” believes that all the people that the state designates as “citizens” are also part of the state. In this view, the state consists not only of government institutions and employees - but also includes all its non-governmental “citizens.” A common view of a so-called “democratic state” is that the state is relatively progressive, beneficial, and participatory - and should represent all citizens. It is believed that all citizens have some “ownership” in the state. It is believed that there are many meaningful ways for citizens to “plug-in” and participate in the state. In fact, some people believe that citizens have a moral responsibility to actively participate in the state. The state is viewed as inclusive, encompassing all citizens, and integral to one’s identity.

Another positive understanding of “the state” believes that the land mass is part of “the state.” The boundaries of the land claimed by the state are believed to be real and legitimate (rather than artificial and illegitimate). The claimed territory of the state is believed to be part of the state, i.e., the government along with its claimed territory is believed to be one entity - unified and indivisible. Patriotism, under this view, is loyalty and allegiance to both country (land mass) and government. In some places the state may be viewed emotionally as “the motherland” or “the fatherland.” The state is viewed as physically all-encompassing, long-lasting, and integral to one’s identity.

The viewpoint presented in this book does not include *all citizens* or *land mass* as integral parts of “the state.” \*1 The state projects its authority over its claimed land mass and over its defined citizens. But it essentially consists of government structures, agencies, and employees. This chapter and chapter two will develop a Christian perspective of the state in which the state tries to supercede God’s position and to co-opt a Christian’s identity.

Let us look next at some of the context for the state's role in "penal slavery."

### Strengthening The National Security State

Important developments of the U.S. "National Security State" occurred during World War II with the militarization of industry and society and the building of a massive war machine - and then, in 1947, with the creation of the National Security Council and the Central Intelligence Agency. Recent decades have seen the strengthening of the "National Security State," where military, police, and security forces and intelligence agencies play a major political role in society.

Since at least 1981 much of the ruling class has been driving a very reactionary movement, building more powerful police and military forces, concentrating more power in the executive branch of government, and shifting even more wealth and power into the hands of the upper class. The reactionary movement has tried, with varying degrees of success, to roll back progressive reforms in labor, welfare, women's rights, gay rights, minority rights, environmental protections, and civil liberties. This movement was given a huge boost by the 9-11-2001 terrorist attacks.<sup>\*2</sup> The ruling class, in a bipartisan manner, manipulated and exploited Americans' emotional responses to 9/11 to further build a "National Security State," further increasing the repressive power of the state.

The 9/11 attacks provided the latest justification for an aggressive foreign policy. Aggressive foreign wars and military strikes are now accepted parts of a so-called perpetual "war on terrorism." The U.S.-orchestrated invasion of Iraq in March 2003 was based on false pretexts. A propaganda campaign was used to mislead Americans and to justify the naked aggression of the so-called "pre-emptive" invasion. Iraq was falsely accused of having weapons of mass destruction and being involved with al-Qaeda in the 9/11 attacks. Also, former U.S.-ally Saddam Hussein was demonized. The war was really about securing U.S. energy interests and increasing U.S.-state-power domestically, in the Middle East, and throughout the world.

"Maintaining a hold on political power and enhancing US control of the world's primary energy sources are major steps

toward the twin goals that have been declared with considerable clarity: to institutionalize a radical restructuring of domestic society that will roll back the progressive reforms of a century, and to establish an imperial grand strategy of permanent world domination.” \*3 (Noam Chomsky)

The U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq are the latest wars to bolster the American empire. The U.S. maintains military bases in over 100 foreign nations. Since World War II, the U.S. has launched dozens of military actions in foreign nations including Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Panama, Grenada, Cuba, Honduras, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Iran, Pakistan, Bosnia, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Foreigners who resisted the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan were treated as having essentially no rights.

“An enemy combatant can be anyone that the US chooses to attack, with no credible evidence, as Washington concedes.” \*4 (Noam Chomsky)

Abuses of foreigners included seizing individuals without charging them, clandestinely moving them to other countries or to secret prisons, employing torturous interrogation techniques, and imprisoning them indefinitely without fundamental rights. \*5

Since 9/11, the U.S. has become even more militarized and authoritarian. The military budget and war expenses have reached enormous levels. And new programs and bipartisan legislation have given the military a larger role in the state’s domestic policies of social control and repression.

Domestically, the U.S. is traveling further down the road of becoming an authoritarian police state where nearly all citizens are suspects. State- and privately-operated surveillance and security measures are expanding everywhere.

“The surveillance component of social control is changing radically. The rationalization of crime control, which began in the nineteenth century, has crossed a critical threshold as a result of broad changes in technology and social organization. Surveillance has become penetrating and intrusive in ways that previously were imagined only in fiction....The new softer forms of control are helping to create a society in which people are permanently under suspicion and surveillance.” \*6 (Gary T. Marx)

More cities are becoming saturated with surveillance cameras and are using ever-more sophisticated listening devices. Police forces and the FBI are rapidly expanding their DNA databases by taking more samples from people convicted of minor crimes or simply detained. Privacy protections are violated and the demographics of the databases expand a racist bias in the legal system. And regardless of which political party is in power, the President “heads a secret government - 4 million Americans with security clearances generating 250 million pages of classified documents a year, and a ‘black budget’ of as much as \$60 billion.” \*7

The state has increased its power of repression and power to spy on Americans through the USA PATRIOT Act, the Pentagon’s Total Information Awareness project, the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security, the National Security Agency’s warrantless eavesdropping on Americans’ international phone calls and e-mails, the Military Commissions Act of 2006, and other bipartisan laws. \*8

“The Total Information Awareness program will be...the most extensive electronic surveillance system in history....it would link a huge number of commercial and governmental databases, both in America and overseas.” \*9 (ACLU)

Electronically-recorded data to be collected and “mined” by the Pentagon can include bank account, credit card, and other financial records, educational records, motor vehicle records, criminal records, medical records, travel records, Internet usage, phone records, library records, e-mail records, and commercial databases.

The oppressive power of the state is being extended further over ordinary citizens.

“National security letters are a little-known FBI tool originally used in foreign intelligence surveillance to obtain phone, financial, and electronic records without court approval. Rarely employed until 2001, they exploded in number after the Patriot Act drastically eased restrictions on their use, allowing NSLs to be served by FBI agents on anyone - whether or not they were the subject of a criminal investigation.” \*10 (Amy Goodman and David Goodman)

The Military Commissions Act of 2006 (MCA) attempts to legalize repressive, totalitarian power of the state. Foreigners whom the state, via the President, identifies as “unlawful enemy combatants” may be imprisoned indefinitely without charges (one of various practices that constitutes torture), denied the right of habeas corpus appeals and other legal rights, tried secretly by a military tribunal which may use so-called “evidence” gained through torture or hearsay, and be executed. The MCA lists offenses that can apply to foreigners, legal resident aliens in the U.S., and even U.S. citizens - essentially anyone.

“In other words, a wide variety of alleged crimes, including some specifically targeted at citizens with ‘an allegiance or duty to the United States,’ would be transferred from civilian courts to military tribunals, where *habeas corpus* and other constitutional rights would not apply.” \*11 (Robert Parry)

The increased repressive powers of the state since 9-11-2001 have been added onto decades of repressive policies of mass incarceration. Since 1980 there has been a massive expansion of the state’s penal system.

“In this one year alone [1995], 150 new prisons were built in the United States and 171 existing prisons were expanded. This was the year the crime bill was passed, mandating that 100,000 additional police officers be added to the already enormous law enforcement establishment. In California, this was the first year that the state budget allocated more money for prisons than higher education....The significance of this movement towards mass incarceration must be seen in a historical context....Examining how the prison system was developed and how it operates today, it is clear that this form of social control has been deeply linked to the institutionalization of racism, working-class oppression, and labor exploitation.” \*12 (Julie Browne)

Since 1980, the number of people incarcerated in the U.S. has more than quadrupled. Today, 2.4 million people are locked up in U.S. juvenile facilities, detention centers, jails, and prisons - and five million more are on parole and/or probation. Reliance on larger police forces and mass incarceration represents a heavy-handed form of the state’s domestic social control policies.

## Legacy Of Imperial Christianity

These are challenging times and the future is foreboding - for many reasons - economic crises, high unemployment and underemployment, increased homelessness, wars, maintaining an extensive, resource-depleting military empire, repressive domestic security forces, nuclear weapons proliferation, spreading radioactive contamination, declining global food reserves, loss of topsoil, shortages of clean drinking water and groundwater, loss of wetlands, desertification, dust storms, forest fires and deforestation, acid rain, acidification of lakes and oceans, endangered coral reefs, overfishing, global warming / climate change, increased burning of fossil fuels, melting of permafrost, melting of glaciers and ice sheets, warmer oceans, rising ocean levels, overpopulation, suburban sprawl, habitat loss, species extinctions, and threats of pandemics. Hope for peace and justice on earth can be hard to sustain. Yet, for people of Christian faith, there are reasons to be hopeful. This hope stems not from any political leader or party but rather from faith in Jesus. It is the revolutionary Way of Jesus that offers a lot of hope for the future. However, due to a long history of imperial Christianity, which united Christianity with the state, the Way of Jesus has largely been shoved aside and ignored. Imperial Christianity, and its enduring legacy, have greatly distorted and perverted Jesus' gospel of liberation.

Imperial Christianity, sometimes referred to as "Christendom," began back in the 4<sup>th</sup> century after Roman emperor Constantine legalized the Christian faith. The terrible alliance of the Roman Empire and Christianity began not long thereafter. The Roman Empire came to be pseudo-Christian and Christianity became Roman. Christianity turned into a religious movement backed by empire - backed by the military power of the empire. The spread of Christianity to the Americas was backed by the violent power of several Western European states that were engaged in empire-building.

There is a long-lasting legacy from many centuries of imperial Christianity. Four items that are part of this legacy will be mentioned here.

*First*, Christians in the U.S. have inherited a legacy of bad theology of the state.

“If the story of Jesus does not immediately cause us to be skeptical of all worldly authorities, it is because we have been brainwashed by almost two thousand years of bad theology to read the Gospels through the lens of church authorities, who since the time of Constantine, have benefited from the power of the state. ‘Christianity,’ says [Jacques] Ellul, ‘is the state religion, and the combination of Christian truth and political power led to the creation of the complex that we know so well....The emperor endows the church handsomely, helps it in all that it does, aids it in its ‘mission.’ The church supports the emperor’s legitimacy and assures that he is God’s representative on earth.’” \*13 (Jeff Dietrich)

Since the time of Constantine, the weight of church doctrine and leadership has, in large part, strongly supported state power. For many centuries Popes and other Roman Catholic officials sanctified rulers and were influential in the governing of European nations. Despite the formal separation of church and state in the United States, most churches in the U.S. are very patriotic and nationalistic. Most churches fly the U.S. flag either inside or outside their buildings and confer strong religious legitimization upon state power.

*Second*, most Christians in the U.S. closely identify with the state. Jesus taught,

“No one can serve two masters. For a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.” (Matthew 6:24)

Most Christians, however, do not seem to have a problem with serving both God and the state. Most Christians believe in “church and state” (or “God and country”) and they believe that service to the state often is service to God. Most Christians believe in the basic legitimacy of the state, have a strong allegiance to the state, and will patriotically pledge allegiance to the flag of the state.

*Third*, Christians in the U.S. often focus their efforts for social change on reforming the government. Some Christians’ hopes for a better future depend upon reforming the state. Most Christians believe the state will be, can be, or is a major agent

in moving society towards social justice. Christians often seek to change governmental leaders and/or laws. Christians' reformist efforts are, in part, a result of their *identifying strongly* with state power, with governing or ruling power, and with the upper or ruling class. Many Christians today, particularly white Christians, are used to having some power and privilege, being backed by state power, and pontificating on what government should do. Many Christians want to be "influential" and to help direct state power towards some of their goals.

*Fourth*, another legacy of imperial Christianity is the negation of Jesus' gospel of liberation. Jesus began a liberation movement - a peace-and-justice movement that is *in conflict with all forms of oppression*. But imperial Christianity, because of its support for the Roman Empire and the Roman legions, had to distort, pervert, and gut the gospel message.

Jesus came to spread the "kingdom of God" on earth - a revolutionary alternative to the oppressive social order and institutions of the nations. But due to its accommodation to Roman power, imperial Christianity had to distort, interiorize, spiritualize, or project as heavenly the "kingdom of God." So the "kingdom of God" has lost most of its original, powerful political meanings. Some terms synonymous with the "kingdom of God," and which try to reclaim some of its original meaning, are the kingdom of God, the beloved community, God's house or family, the reign of God, or, as often used in this book, God's commonwealth on earth. "God's commonwealth on earth" emphasizes the here-on-earth dimensions of God's kingdom, as well as connoting the egalitarian sharing of economic and political power among followers of Jesus. God's commonwealth on earth is much different from the state since it has no fixed territory, compulsory laws, armed forces, or human power structure.

Consistent with God's revolutionary alternative to the nations is the fact that God sent Jesus as a "pacifist Messiah" to reveal a new way to liberation. The terms "Christ" and "Messiah" both mean "the anointed" - the one who is designated and empowered by God to provide leadership for God's liberation movement. As the Messiah, Jesus rejected the use of violence and modeled a nonviolent or "pacifist" way of changing the

world. In this book the term “pacifist Messiah” will be used often and the quotation marks simply indicate that this is only one of many ways to describe Jesus. But it is a very important description.

God sent Jesus, the “pacifist Messiah,” to Israel in fulfillment of prophecies made by various prophets. But the “pacifist Messiah” wasn’t what most Jewish people wanted or expected. Most Jewish people wanted a “warrior Messiah” who would help to overthrow their Roman oppressors and restore to Israel the independence, power, and glory it had under King David. Despite some false expectations, Jesus began a discipleship / liberation movement among the Jewish people. The movement was rooted in the Jews’ historical relationship with the God of creation, liberation, and justice. Jesus, however, rejected resort to violence and a violent insurrection. Instead, Jesus preached nonviolence and love for all people - including love for enemies. Jesus became well-known and highly-regarded and was viewed as a threat to the privileged and affluent Jewish religious establishment. The Jewish religious leaders collaborated with the Roman authorities to arrest, torture, and crucify Jesus. Right after Jesus was crucified his followers lost hope that Jesus was really the Messiah. They were afraid and depressed. At that time they did not comprehend the meanings and implications of a “pacifist Messiah.” But after the unexpected resurrection of Jesus, the discipleship / liberation movement was revived - and was filled with new hope.

The reality of a “pacifist Messiah” was extremely important to the early movement. The “scandal,” or outrageous belief, of the early discipleship movement was that it believed in a “pacifist Messiah” who was crucified by the Romans. And then resurrected. The evangelist Paul wrote,

“For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:22-24)

Conversion to “Christ crucified” meant for Paul a conversion to a life of nonviolence. Proclamation of “Christ crucified” brought about a schism that led followers of Jesus to break away from the Jewish establishment. Proclamation of “Christ crucified”

also didn't make much sense to most Gentiles. "Christ crucified" was a "scandalous" belief/reality that was a consequence of the shocking revelation that God had sent a "pacifist Messiah."

For nearly three hundred years the Christian movement was a pacifist movement. The movement continued to grow despite periods of severe persecution from the Roman authorities. Christians were uniformly committed to nonviolence as a discipleship practice. Christians were committed to following the "pacifist Messiah" - up until the time of Roman emperor Constantine. Then imperial Christianity started to come into being - and replaced liberation with church-state oppression.

God sent Jesus, the "pacifist Messiah," to begin a new liberation movement. It wasn't what most Jewish people wanted. And it wasn't what the world wanted. But it's what God sent. Jesus represents a startling revelation. Jesus is a revelation of "the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations." (Colossians 1:26) Yet today, because of imperial Christianity and its enduring legacy, most Christians do not comprehend the meanings and implications of the "pacifist Messiah." The mystery hidden for ages still remains a mystery to most Christians and to most of the world.

Christians' and the world's understanding of God needs to be revolutionized - or the trajectory of human history will never improve. Understanding God better and linking up with God's liberation movement can be beneficial to suffering humanity. The Messiah sent by God 2000 years ago is still quite relevant to humanity's plight today. The Messiah is particularly relevant for all who are oppressed and who hunger and thirst for the justice and righteousness of God on earth.

### Footnotes

1. When speaking about issues related to the state, many people use the inclusive, democratic "we" - which includes listeners in the topic discussed. But the democratic "we" falsely implies a common national identity, an inclusive government,

and a unity of all citizens with the state and its ruling class. Some people find objectionable this construction of a false national unity and identity. Followers of Jesus, and others, may want to forge their own identity apart from and in opposition to oppressive state power.

Similarly, the geographic borders of nations are really “fictions” - although they are supported by the political power and military might of nation-states. Laws, custom agents, border patrols, immigration raids, visas, passports, and other state documentation of identity reinforce the state’s artificial boundaries and artificial construction of a “national identity.” But people who believe in a God who created the universe can understand nations’ borders as “fictions” - as artificial divisions of the land.

2. Despite any number of bogus conspiracy theories, there remain legitimate questions about state foreknowledge of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and, consequently, complicity in the attacks. If the official 9/11 Commission Report was a government whitewash, then what exactly did it cover up?
3. Noam Chomsky, Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 2003, 2004, p. 125.
4. Ibid. p. 27.
5. “In February [2006], five UN experts, including the Special Rapporteur on torture, issued a report of their investigation into conditions at Guantanamo, calling for the facility to be closed. They found that some of the alleged treatment of detainees, including the use of solitary confinement, excessive force and the brutal manner of force-feeding during a hunger strike, amounted to torture. In May [2006] the UN Committee Against Torture also called for the closure of Guantanamo, noting that holding people indefinitely without charge constituted a violation of the UN Convention against Torture.” Amnesty International Report 2007: the state of the world's human rights, “United States of America,” from amnesty.org. “Reports indicate that the treatment of detainees since their arrests, and the conditions of their confinement have had profound effects on the mental health of many of them. The treatment and conditions include the capture and transfer of detainees to an undisclosed overseas location, sensory deprivation and other abusive treatment during transfer; detention in cages

without proper sanitation and exposure to extreme temperatures; minimal exercise and hygiene; systematic use of coercive interrogation techniques; long periods of solitary confinement; cultural and religious harassment; denial of or severely delayed communication with family; and the uncertainty generated by the indeterminate nature of confinement and denial of access to independent tribunals.” 2006 report of five United Nations experts on situation of detainees at Guantanamo Bay, quoted by Amnesty International in Cruel and Inhuman: Conditions of Isolation for detainees at Guantanamo Bay, April 5, 2007, from amnesty.org. The prospective closing of Guantanamo’s detention center and prison does not include freeing the detainees or holding any state official accountable for the systemic torture of detainees.

6. Gary T. Marx, “The New Surveillance,” States of Confinement: Policing, Detention, and Prisons, Joy James, editor, Palgrave, New York, 2000, 2002, pp. 258, 266.
7. Dave Gibson, review of Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon’s Secret World, by Trevor Paglen, Dutton, in Mother Jones, March/April 2009, p. 75.
8. Federal courts have declared parts of this mass of repressive laws illegal and/or unconstitutional. However, there remains a very significant shift in the direction of greater state power and less civil liberties.
9. American Civil Liberties Union, “ACLU Calls on President Bush to Disavow New Cyber-Spying Scheme That Seeks to Put Every American Under Scrutiny,” News Release, Washington D.C., 11-14-2002, from aclu.org.
10. Amy Goodman and David Goodman, “America’s Most Dangerous Librarians,” Mother Jones, September/October 2008, Illinois, p. 43.
11. Robert Parry, “Shame on Us All,” 10-18-2006, from consortiumnews.com.
12. Julie Browne, “The Labor of Doing Time: Prison Labor in the U.S.,” senior thesis at the University of California, Santa Cruz, 1995, from prisonactivist.org.
13. Jeff Dietrich, “Biblical Anarchism and the Catholic Worker,” Catholic Agitator, Los Angeles Catholic Worker, Los Angeles, April 2007, p. 2.