

# Centers and Margins: Exploring Falwell's and King's Constructions of God as a Way to Understand Religious Tensions in a Predominantly White, Evangelical History Classroom

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**SCENE ONE:** *The military chaplain walks up to the pulpit and starts a video on the large white screen next to the illuminated cross. Women in hijabs, small children, men of darker complexions, all move across the display to a rather mournful melody from a single rebab. They are poor; they are scared, and they need to be rescued. Cue the rock 'n' roll soundtrack and American soldiers launching missiles, driving tanks, and zigzagging through Iraqi streets with large automatic weapons in hand. "These men and women," the chaplain explains, "are out there fighting against evil in the same way that Christ came to this Earth to fight against evil."*

**SCENE TWO:** *Students are discussing a quote by Camus in a history class: "There are causes worth dying for, but none worth killing for." The conversation turns to soldiers and war. All but one or two students explain that killing in defense of yourself or others is "okay." The discussion ends with a student thinking aloud, "As a*

*Christian, I don't think killing is ever okay. But war is okay because you're protecting people. But soldiers kill in a war, and if killing is never okay, then maybe war is not okay? I'm confused."*

SCENE THREE: *A student presents the research she conducted with her parents in response to a history lesson: "The military-industrial complex is liberal brainwashing. The story about Halliburton isn't true and it was just a way to discredit Bush and Cheney."*

These stories, and their many variations, took place in school chapel and in my classroom over the three years that I taught history at a predominantly white, evangelical high school. I present these scenes not to contemplate the morality of war or whether a "true Christian" should be pro-war or anti-war. Instead, I offer them as the locations from which questions emerged that I continue to grapple with as an educator and as a person of faith: Why did so many of my students and their families connect Christianity and patriotism? Why did I have to defend myself as a history teacher when I taught the military-industrial complex?

Overall, I found nearly all my students, their families, and my colleagues to be thoughtful, open-minded, and compassionate individuals whom I came to care for quite deeply and who I believe came to care for me as well. However, even though many inside and outside of the school would consider me an "indigenous insider,"<sup>1</sup> when my lesson plans did not align with the overt political and theological practices of the school, or when parents pushed against certain topics, I was often terrified that I would be fired. In these moments, I felt positioned partially in the margins of the school community as a "perpetual foreigner"<sup>2</sup> or as an "internal enemy"<sup>3</sup>—one who claims to follow the same Jesus, but has become too liberal, as examples, in my decision not to pledge allegiance to the flag, or in my use of Halliburton during discussions of the military-industrial complex. This unease and its accompanying questions accrued over my three years there as I began to process my experiences and emotions.

Two years into graduate school, these questions shifted: Why do people who claim the same epistemological beliefs interpret and express these beliefs in ways that seem diametrically opposed? And how can I understand tensions in the classroom that arise from such divergent expressions of religious faith, especially in the context of

history? There are a number of ways to examine these questions across disciplines, theories, and demographic characteristics. However, I will focus on texts by two prominent figures who have had and continue to hold power and influence in the evangelical Christian community: Jerry Falwell and Martin Luther King Jr. Falwell and King have both been a part of the formal curriculum in churches and schools (though their depictions vary by context); they have also contributed to the creation of norms, in certain communities regarding Christianity and politics, that reciprocally inform the construction of dominant narratives in U.S. history. Raymond Williams' "selective tradition" aptly describes the process by which Falwell builds his views on the U.S. and war. Falwell chooses from history and the Bible, and with the selectivity described by Williams, "certain meanings and practices are chosen for emphasis, [while] certain other meanings and practices are neglected and excluded."<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, King's inclusion in the history curriculum often undergoes the process of selective tradition in which his "meanings and practices are reinterpreted, diluted, or put into forms which support or at least do not contradict other elements within the effective dominant culture."<sup>5</sup> His narrative is diluted into a single speech ("I Have a Dream") and a simplified version of non-violent ideology, while his theology of structural sin and his increasing condemnation of the United States are "neglected."<sup>6</sup>

Inclusion of Dr. King in the classroom, undiluted, represents a possible counter to both the subtle and overt rhetoric of nationalism exemplified by Jerry Falwell, as well as many contemporary U.S. citizens. What I discovered in my own attempts to use such counter narratives in a history course is that despite the narratives being based on epistemological beliefs shared by my students, many of my students still vigorously rejected them. Taking a step back to the primary sources themselves to foster understanding of Falwell and King's contrasting expressions of the same religion can perhaps illuminate student responses. In this intellectual history, I examine Falwell's "God is Pro-War" essay and King's "Why I am Opposed to the War in Vietnam" speech as exemplars of two perspectives that were represented in my former classroom. Next, I use Jung Young Lee's theology of marginality to analyze the authors and their texts from a faith-based perspective that provides one possible answer to my questions.

### **Binaries, Swords, and Nations: Falwell in 2004**

In 2004, Jerry Falwell published “God is Pro-War,” an online essay defending President George W. Bush’s war in Iraq as a “worthy pursuit” in the broader context of how Christians, or those who “depend on the Bible as a guidepost for living,” ought to view war in general.<sup>7</sup> His short commentary conveys not only his argument, but a clear image of the world he sees. If the war in Iraq is the focal point, and a Christian view of war is the background, the frame that sets the boundaries of this picture is Falwell’s worldview. Beginning with a famous passage from Ecclesiastes—“To every thing there is a season...A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal...a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace,”—Falwell presents an understanding founded on binaries.<sup>8</sup> God is a “God of peace” yet also a “God of war.” We live in a “fallen world,” but hope to experience “how He created the universe—in total peace and harmony.”<sup>9</sup> On one side of Falwell’s “we” are the Israelites, and on the other are the nations “trying to conquer Israel.”<sup>10</sup> The current “we” is “America,” versus the “horrible realities of our fallen world.”<sup>11</sup> Falwell extends these couplings to a more theological perspective with “the church” on one hand, and “evil” on the other.<sup>12</sup> The “just” versus the “workers of iniquity,” as described in Proverbs.<sup>13</sup> Although he alludes to the possibility that at least one binary is linear (“The Bible tells us war will be a reality until Christ returns”<sup>14</sup>), Falwell makes quite clear that most other binaries exist simultaneously, but are positioned in what Derrida would describe as a “violent hierarchy.”<sup>15</sup> Derrida may have been relating the reality of binary oppositions, but Falwell upholds such a reality as the only possibility, further anticipating a future in which one side will dominate and eventually completely negate the other. Thus, in this reality, there is no possibility for a God who “longs for all people to live in peace.”<sup>16</sup> Instead, in need of a God who can dominate and negate, there is a God of war, paradoxically described as “a necessary option,” who will come “bearing a ‘sharp sword’ and smiting nations.”<sup>17</sup> Until this future time of Christ’s second coming, however, who will take up the sword?

Falwell juxtaposes this “necessary” but optional God with the individuals who led Israel into war:

God actually strengthened individuals for war, including Moses, Joshua and many of the Old Testament judges who demonstrated great faith in battle. And God destroyed many armies challenging the Israelites. I Chronicles 14:15 describes God striking down the Philistines.<sup>18</sup>

Two beliefs emerge from this text. War can be “God-ordained” and individuals who “destroy” and “strike down” in war can be carrying out God’s actions.<sup>19</sup> This juxtaposition is significant also as a transition to America as the new Israel, or those who will take up a “sharp sword.” Interspersed between commentary about God, Israel, and war, America is situated as a nation chosen by God:

God even gives counsel to be wise in war. Proverbs 20:18: “Every purpose is established by counsel: and with good advice make war.” Today, America continues to face the horrible realities of our fallen world. Suicide bombings and terrorist actions are beamed live into our homes daily. This serves as a constant reminder of the frailty of our flesh. It is apparent that *our God-authored freedoms* [emphasis added] must be defended. Throughout the book of Judges, God calls the Israelites to go to war against the Midianites and Philistines. Why? Because these nations were trying to conquer Israel, and God’s people were called to defend themselves. President Bush declared war in Iraq to defend innocent people. This is a worthy pursuit. In fact, Proverbs 21:15 tells us: “It is joy to the just to do judgment: but destruction shall be to the workers of iniquity.”<sup>20</sup>

For Falwell, the United States is now God’s chosen nation in *nearly* the same way that the Israelites were favored by God in the Old Testament. In leaving out the many instances in which even the chosen people of God, the Israelites, are rebuked for acting contrary to God’s commandments, Falwell obfuscates the possibility that the United States might act contrary to God’s will. Instead, he sustains the belief that the United States was founded as a Christian nation in which even the Constitution (our “freedoms”) is divinely inspired (“God-authored”).<sup>21</sup> American ideals, then, not only stand over and against evil, but also must be defended when “evil” seeks to spread in the United States and throughout the world—as exemplified by Iraq. Through the construction of this narrative, American wars become “God-ordained” and even as collective memories of Vietnam loomed, the invasion of Iraq became “Operation Iraqi Freedom.”

### **Binaries, Truth, and Patriotism: King in 1967**

In the sermon “Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam,” Martin Luther King Jr. constructs meanings of patriotism and truth within a framework that divides actions and values into one of two possibilities: right or wrong. Underlying this binary is King’s faith in a God of “love,” as well as his “commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, what is “right” is King’s interpretation and expression of that commitment. As with most other binaries, there is no possibility outside of itself. What King presents, then, is a sermon that outlines not only his reasons for opposing the war in Vietnam, but also how patriotism and truth should be understood and lived for anyone “determined to take the Gospel seriously.”<sup>23</sup>

King never uses the phrase “true patriotism,” but the notion is present as he outlines the more commonly expressed “superficial patriotism”—a state of either blindness to “sin” or “apathy.”<sup>24</sup> In the latter, patriotism is superficial because it is built on “rationalizations and the incessant search for scapegoats,” or what he describes as “untruth”:

[T]he truth is hard to come by because most nations are deceived about themselves...He who lives with untruth lives in spiritual slavery. Freedom is still the bonus we receive for knowing the truth. “Ye shall know the truth,” says Jesus, “and the truth shall set you free.”<sup>25</sup>

Patriotism becomes connected to one’s spiritual state, and the condition of one’s spiritual state is dependent on seeking and knowing the truth. Truth, however, is often obstructed by apathy in the form of neutrality or conformity. Though one may claim to be neutral, the text is quite clear that neutrality “in a period of moral crisis” is when “silence becomes betrayal.”<sup>26</sup> King’s use of the term “truth” and its connection to Jesus creates an understanding that the moral in “moral crisis” is an absolute—thus, sustained neutrality becomes a betrayal of truth and morality. In the same way, the “apathy of conformist thought within one’s own bosom and in the surrounding world” is a “silence [that] becomes betrayal.”<sup>27</sup> This silence is perpetuated when patriotism does not include an active search for truth, but settles for comfort and the dominant voices of the world. King shapes a patriotism and a reality in which truth will not be found in the government, or in the norms and beliefs at the center of society. In this reality, President Johnson’s invasion

of Vietnam would not be considered a “worthy pursuit.” Indeed, King calls upon true patriots to emerge from “smooth patriotism” and into “the high grounds of firm dissent, based upon the mandates of conscience and the reading of history”:

The truth must be told, and I say that those who are seeking to make it appear that anyone who opposes the war in Vietnam is a fool or a traitor or an enemy of our soldiers is a person that has taken a stand against the best in our tradition.<sup>28</sup>

Here, he links “mandates of conscience” with the truth he related earlier and the reader or listener can understand that there is a right patriotism and a wrong patriotism. Often found in the nation and dominant discourses, a superficial patriotism is one based on deceit (sometimes self-deceit) and a lack of concern for truth. Smooth patriotism not only hides truth, but also silences dissent. King’s patriotism, in contrast, is one of spiritual freedom found in the search for *and* application of historical—and I would argue—spiritual truth.

His sermon presents two categories of truth deemed significant and upon which opposition to the war is based. King communicates the importance of knowing the truth of history by recounting the mostly violent and immoral story of U.S. involvement in Vietnam from when the country was known as French Indochina.<sup>29</sup> Without this history, only superficial patriotism is possible, and a war that King describes as “unjust, evil, and futile” will continue.<sup>30</sup> Another set of historical truths that King narrates establishes an American history of dissent, which he refers to as “the best in our tradition.” Likewise, he extols the founding structures of America, built with “pillars [that] were solidly grounded in the insights of our Judeo-Christian heritage.”<sup>31</sup> As America strays from these traditions, however, the country is “moving down a dead-end road that can lead to national disaster.”<sup>32</sup> King depicts an America in crisis, a picture that is echoed by Falwell: “today, America continues to face the horrible realities of our fallen world.”<sup>33</sup> Where King’s text diverges from this shared image is in the spiritual truths he weaves throughout the text as the dominant driving force in his opposition to the war and in his decision to preach this sermon: “I speak to you on this issue, because I am determined to take the Gospel seriously.”<sup>34</sup> King states: “I would yet have to live with the meaning of my commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ...I must be true to my conviction that I share with all men the calling to be the son of the Living God.”<sup>35</sup>

How does King interpret the Gospel, the ministry of Jesus Christ, the calling to be the son of the Living God? What are the spiritual truths he presents? King articulates four beliefs that he holds to be true for anyone committed to the ministry of Jesus Christ: God is a God of peace and a God of love for all people; America is not God's chosen nation; the glory of God is justice established; to be a child of the Living God is to know suffering. Essentially, Dr. King presents love, humility, justice, and suffering as essential to the life of a Christian here and now.

### One Nation Under God's Judgment

In "God is Pro-War," Falwell focuses on justice, therefore, a God of peace is superseded by a God of war in a world that is overtaken by evil. The God of war is a "necessary option." For King, however, a God of peace is the only option:

To me, the relationship [commitment to Christ] of this ministry to the making of peace is so obvious that I sometimes marvel at those who ask me why I am speaking against the war. Could it be that they do not know that the Good News was meant for all men, for communists and capitalists, for their children and ours, for black and white, for revolutionary and conservative? Have they forgotten that my ministry is in obedience to the One who loved His enemies so fully that he died for them?<sup>36</sup>

By merging a God of peace and a God who *is* love, King extends God's desire for peace beyond Americans, Christians, the "innocent" that President Bush later sought to defend, and even enemies. According to King, "All men are made in the image of God...are created equal...[and] every man is an heir to a legacy of dignity and worth."<sup>37</sup> Like Falwell's "God-authored freedoms," the characteristics and inheritance that King describes are "God-given," but they are given to *all* people. Thus, King moves beyond national borders, race, and religion to create a "brotherhood" of humanity, one in which America does not have a special position:

And don't let anybody make you think that God chose America as his divine, messianic force to be a sort of policeman of the whole world. God has a way of standing before the nations with judgment, and it seems that I can hear God saying to America, "You're too arrogant! And if you don't change your ways, I will rise up and break the



backbone of your power, and I'll place it in the hands of a nation that doesn't even know my name. Be still and know that I'm God."<sup>38</sup>

America then, has no more a special role than being a part of the "brotherhood" of humanity.

Another similarity between King's sermon and Falwell's essay is a relationship between the United States and God. In holding up the United States as the new Israel, Falwell justifies American wars, whereas King holds up the United States as one of many nations before whom God stands in judgment. One can infer from the previous passage that America may know God's name, but does not actually know God. King's assessment of God's judgment of America is made much clearer when he names the United States as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today."<sup>39</sup> Throughout his sermon, he builds his case against the U.S. government, beginning with the re-direction of resources for the poor towards the war effort. He points out the high proportion of the poor among the soldiers sent to Vietnam and the hypocrisy of black and white soldiers segregated in America, but fighting and dying together for a "democracy" eight thousand miles away, which he calls a "cruel manipulation of the poor."<sup>40</sup> King continues by calling out the inconsistency of "a nation and a press that will praise you when you say, 'Be non-violent toward Jim Clark,' but will curse and damn you when you say, 'Be non-violent toward little brown Vietnamese children.'"<sup>41</sup> From King's perspective, the war in Vietnam highlights the violence stemming from the injustices of American values and economic structures on the Vietnamese and all others who are exploited:

This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice, and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.<sup>42</sup>

King is quite clear: America is *not* God's chosen nation and indeed will be judged for its arrogance and violence. Therefore, King is able to endorse the belief that as a follower of Christ, his commitment is to God first, not the United States. The sermon itself is evidence of his allegiance: "our government and the press generally won't

tell us these things, but God told me to tell you this morning. The truth must be told.”<sup>43</sup>

A primary allegiance to God, in King’s view, seeks a transformation of unjust structures:

[W]e are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be changed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway.<sup>44</sup>

Individual acts of compassion are not adequate in carrying out the structural transformations that King envisions. What must precede our actions and the “whole Jericho Road... changed” is a “radical revolution of values” in which human beings are placed above and beyond material possessions, wealth, and comfort.<sup>45</sup> Unlike “God is Pro-War,” “Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam” does not create a defensive stance in which “good” values at home must be protected from the spread of evil abroad. Instead, King not only questions American values, but locates evil *within* the United States. Specifically, he names “racism, economic exploitation, and militarism” as the “triple evils” that must be challenged so that “the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.”<sup>46</sup> Consequently, “taking the Gospel seriously” demands “hostility” towards the triple evils that can be expressed by “boldly challeng[ing] the status quo...[and] unjust morés.”<sup>47</sup> Speaking out against the Vietnam War would be one tangible example. The call for structural transformation begins at home, according to King. What King offers in his sermon is the possibility to question and hold accountable one’s own government to its foundational principles as well as to values, such as justice and equality, grounded in the Gospel.

Is there a difference in Falwell’s belief that the government instill the values of his religious faith? Foundationally, Falwell and King uphold absolute values that emerge from religion. Both apply these values to their interactions within the political and cultural sphere, and believe that governments ought to be responsive to these values. That “God is Pro-War” is read as right-wing, conservative commentary, and “Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam” is often ignored for being too “radical,” is, I would argue, a result of how power is understood in each text.

## Suffering Love and Just War

In Falwell's essay, he makes quite clear that he locates power in military might. God "strengthened individuals for war." "God destroyed many armies." "God gives counsel to be wise in war." "God calls the Israelites to go to war." "God [calls on his] people to defend themselves." Ultimately, "the Lord is a man of war: the Lord is his name."<sup>48</sup> Falwell's power is what King would label "militarism." In contrast, King locates power in love and suffering:

This oft misunderstood and misinterpreted concept, so readily dismissed by the Nietzsches of the world as a weak and cowardly force, has now become an absolute necessity for the survival of mankind. And when I speak of love I'm not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life. Love is somehow the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality.<sup>49</sup>

King's thoughts on love are developed much more deeply in his other texts; nonetheless, love is a powerful presence in "Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam." Because God's love is for all people, including those America regards as enemies or disregards as unimportant or collateral, war must be considered in light of *all* humanity. Thus, love, not military might, is the only power that names and challenges injustice without reproducing its violence on the victims *or* the perpetrators. Similar to Freire's struggle of the oppressed against oppressors, King envisions God's love as "restorers of the humanity of both."<sup>50</sup> In order for this love to restore humanity, however, followers of Christ must be willing to endure suffering as Christ did in his sacrifice of himself.

King's theology of suffering can be read in his sermon as proclaiming, or perhaps reminding, that "to be a follower to Jesus Christ means taking up the cross."<sup>51</sup> To be a follower of Christ means following in his footsteps and willingly suffering or sacrificing, even to the point of death on a cross, for the redemption of humankind. In the case of the war in Vietnam and the injustices within the United States, King makes clear that standing against violence and injustice will be difficult, but enduring those difficulties will lead to change:

And my Bible tells me that Good Friday comes before Easter. Before the Crown we wear, there is the cross that we must bear. Let us bear it—bear it for truth, bear it for justice, and bear it for peace.<sup>52</sup>

King locates power in suffering because one who “takes the Gospel seriously” will understand that the Gospel is a story of suffering turned into redemption, of “Good Friday [that] comes before Easter.”<sup>53</sup> Redemption for all humankind is made possible through the suffering, the crucifixion of the Son of God because God so loves the world. In “Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam,” power that is built on truth and that can establish justice and peace will not be found in militarism, or in the government, or in any traditional center of dominance. For followers of Christ, power can be found where human power is weakest, so that God’s love and “power is made perfect.”<sup>54</sup> Through the poetry of James Russell Lowell, King reveals his theological stance on power and suffering: “‘Truth forever on the scaffold, Wrong forever on the throne.’—Yet that scaffold sways the future.”<sup>55</sup> For Falwell, suffering does not come from willingly letting go of power, but from losing power and security. Thus, in contrast to King’s justice that is tied to love, humility, and the redemption of all humankind, Falwell’s justice is his own truth and his own security “forever on the throne.”

Though Falwell and King share certain epistemological stances, their theology and practice seem, at many times, diametrically opposed. Falwell’s “pro-war” God brandishes a “sharp sword” for his chosen nation, America.<sup>56</sup> King’s God is love for all humanity, especially for “His suffering and helpless and outcast children.”<sup>57</sup> The America that he loves may claim a Judeo-Christian heritage, but the nation stands in judgment before God. Falwell’s church is a divine instrument used to stem the spread of evil, “even at the cost of human lives.”<sup>58</sup> His church is called and equipped by God to defend itself. King’s followers of Christ extend God’s love and peace to all people, especially to those who suffer under violence and injustice. Rather than defend themselves with violence, King’s Christians accept suffering as an inevitable and necessary part of God’s call for his people to challenge injustice and transform structures. These divergent expressions are framed in texts that regard certain truths and morals to be absolute. Both reveal the Bible as a source of revelation and both point towards the “salvific power of Christ.”<sup>59</sup>

## Centers and Margins

If viewed through Jung Young Lee's theology of marginality,<sup>60</sup> the differences between "God is Pro-War" and "Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam" can be explained, in part, as a result of the positions and orientations of Jerry Falwell and Martin Luther King. A theology of marginality posits that the creation of a center produces margins within society; that centrality, though constructed, is internalized:

Traditionally, we have learned to think from the perspective of centrality. We, therefore, think that the center defines the margin. When the rain fills the pond, the margin or the periphery expands; when the dry season comes, the margin of the pond contracts. Yet the center *seems* the same. Moreover, action takes place in the center. The margin *seems* and appears to respond only to what happens at the center. The center is not only steady but is the origin of action. Thus, the center is attractive and seems to be a preferable location for us to be.<sup>61</sup>

Lee sees a God who situates Godself in the margins. In the incarnation of Christ, God chose "divine marginalization."<sup>62</sup> In choosing to take on the human form of a servant to all, God chose "the margin of marginality."<sup>63</sup> Thus, for those who desire to see and move in the world as God does, they can only do so from the margin. To seek the center is to desire "power, wealth, and honor...a destructive power in creating injustice."<sup>64</sup> At the center, claims Lee, is a "dead god."<sup>65</sup>

Falwell's insistence on "defending" oneself, his positioning of the United States as God's chosen nation, and his defining the church's "primary purpose" as fighting (literally) against evil, all reveal a desire for centrality, security, power, and domination.<sup>66</sup> Theologically, Falwell continues the process of selective tradition in which he is "more interested in [Christ's] lordship than his servanthood, and more interested in his resurrection than his death."<sup>67</sup> Unlike King's followers of Christ, Falwell's church, which he places in a defensive stance until the return of Christ, "becomes a stable institution. [A] centralist inclination [for security] prevents the church from being transformative and creative in the world."<sup>68</sup> From the standpoint of a theology of marginality, Falwell writes as one who locates himself in the center, and is oriented towards the center and remaining in the center; therefore, Falwell's "pro-war God" is quite possibly, a "dead god," or an idol.

King, by virtue of his race, is already positioned in the margins. Through the lens of Lee's theology, I would add that King's marginal location predisposes him to a certain theology. However, what may be more significant in distinguishing King from Falwell is King's orientation away from the center and towards the margin of marginality. His theology upholds a God who is a God of love for *all* people; therefore, King looks away from traditional notions of power such as military might and offers love in their stead. He exposes the guilt of government and society's "proneness to adjust to injustice," in the hopes that the "*truth shall set you free* (emphasis added)."<sup>69</sup> King's theology in "Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam" can be interpreted as one of marginality in which "justice is not possible without eliminating the centralist ideology of dominance. The church cannot eliminate the dominion of which it is a part. Thus, the most urgent task of the church today is to *liberate itself*" (emphasis added).<sup>70</sup> A centralist such as Falwell depends on the perpetuation of ideology that sustains the centrality of he and his god. From the margins, King seeks to break "the recurring symbols of centralist ideology...until everyone is free."<sup>71</sup>

### **White Evangelicals: 81% Centralists?**

Twenty-four years before the invasion of Iraq, Martin Luther King preached at Riverside Church in New York, against the urging of many friends and colleagues. His topic of choice was controversial and indeed resulted in rather serious political and social repercussions. Yet both his sermon and the consequences are largely absent from the current "de-facto national curriculum" of the United States,<sup>72</sup> and, I would argue, are also omitted within current evangelical and general educational discourse. What is often left is a story that confirms, or at least does not disrupt, Falwell's conception of the U.S. as a Christian nation chosen by God to combat evil.

Similar understandings abounded at my former school amongst many of my students, their families, my colleagues, and the administration as they defended the legacy of President Bush. However, the shift in 2008 from a Republican, white, "evangelical" president to Barack Obama, an increase in LGBTQ+ rights, women's rights (e.g., wages and choice), changing demographics of the United States, and the increasing coverage of events that challenge the U.S. as a post-racial

society, has heightened the fear and anxiety of white evangelicals.<sup>73</sup> As a result, Falwell's war against evil (i.e., terrorism and suicide attacks) is now located within the borders of the United States. It is a war that seeks to restore a perceived Christian and color-blind (i.e., white) traditional and historical center of the United States.<sup>74</sup>

In 2016, the struggle to reclaim a center for evangelicals did not stop with the election of Donald Trump, or the defeat of Hillary Clinton. Donald Trump's assurance that "we're going to protect Christianity, and I can say that. I don't have to be politically correct. We're going to protect it...we're gonna be saying Merry Christmas at every store....You can leave 'happy holidays' at the corner,"<sup>75</sup> is an indication of his appeal to white evangelicals, and a political acknowledgement of their feelings of attack. If anything, efforts to re-center *their* Christian values (heteronormative, patriarchal, white American culture) in the United States seems to be invigorated and legitimized, reminiscent of the height of the culture wars in the 1990s. Though Jonathan Zimmerman argues that the "culture war—over religion and morality—continues to plague the nation's public school...remain[ing] much more prevalent and much more polarized than our history conflicts."<sup>76</sup> I would suggest that the two wars over religion and history cannot be so easily divided. A part of this renewed struggle for centrality will be a continued rejection by many evangelical students of any narrative that questions the U.S. as a nation, as a new Israel, in which God has been and can be the center.<sup>77</sup> This is a challenge that I faced daily and often failed to understand when I taught high school history in an evangelical setting.

### What Now?

Though the current language of evangelicalism may not always sound as extreme as Falwell's assertions in "God is Pro-War," the underlying assumptions are the same. There is little difference in epistemological foundations, I would argue, between "God bless America" and "It is apparent that our God-authored freedoms must be defended."<sup>78</sup> Nor is the popular refrain, "pray for our troops," or evangelical pastor Rick Warren's statement regarding Syria—"let there be no doubt about our support for President Bush, our troops in Iraq and the war on terror"<sup>79</sup>—far from Falwell's assertion that "One of the primary purposes of the church is to stop the spread

of evil, even at the cost of human lives.”<sup>80</sup> The discourse at home, church, and at school “help[ed] create people (with the appropriate meanings and values) who see no other serious possibility to the economic and cultural assemblage now extant.”<sup>81</sup> If this discourse reflects hegemonic beliefs within white, evangelical America, Martin Luther King’s sermon is necessary as a “competing [conception] of social and economic power and ideologies.”<sup>82</sup>

## Notes

1. James A. Banks, “The Lives and Values of Researchers: Implications for Educating Citizens in a Multicultural Society,” *Educational Researcher* 27, no. 7 (October 1998): 7.

2. Mia Tuan, *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites? The Asian Ethnic Experience Today* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998). For example, a student tweeted about an offhand comment I had made in class about race and the school. To paraphrase: “[My school] is so white, even my Korean teacher makes fun of it.” In another instance, a student went to great lengths trying to trick me into saying “white power.”

3. Richard T. Antoun, *Understanding Fundamentalism: Christian, Islamic, and Jewish Movements* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 56.

4. Raymond Williams, “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,” in *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays* (London, United Kingdom: Verso, 2005), 39.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Jerry Falwell, “God is Pro-War,” commentary, *WND* (formerly *WorldNewsDaily*), 31 January 2004, <<https://www.wnd.com/2004/01/23022/print/>>, para. 7, 15.

8. Ibid., para. 1.

9. Ibid., para. 12, 4.

10. Ibid., para. 14.

11. Ibid., para. 12.

12. Ibid., para. 16.

13. Ibid., para. 15.

14. Ibid., para. 20.

15. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 42.

16. Falwell, para. 4.

17. Ibid., para. 8, 7.

18. Ibid., para. 10.



19. Ibid., para. 7, 10.
20. Ibid., para. 11-15.
21. Ibid., para. 13.
22. Martin Luther King Jr., "Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam," speech delivered at Riverside Church, New York City, 30 April 1967, transcript available at The Pacifica Radio/UC Berkeley Social Activism Sound Recording Project, <<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/pacificaviet/riversidetranscript.html>>, para. 10.
23. Ibid., para. 5.
24. Ibid., para. 2.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., para. 3.
28. Ibid., para. 4.
29. Ibid., para. 11-12.
30. Ibid., para. 2.
31. Ibid., para. 16.
32. Ibid.
33. Falwell, para. 12.
34. King, para. 5.
35. Ibid., para. 10.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., para. 16.
38. Ibid., para. 17.
39. Ibid., para. 9.
40. Ibid., para. 7-8.
41. Ibid., para. 9.
42. Ibid., para. 13.
43. Ibid., para. 11.
44. Ibid., para. 13.
45. Ibid., para. 12.
46. Ibid., para. 16, 14.
47. Ibid., para. 14.
48. Falwell, para. 10, 11, 13, 9.
49. King, para. 15.
50. Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 44.
51. King, para. 18.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
54. 2 Corinthians 12:9, Revised Standard Version.
55. King, para. 18.
56. Falwell, para. 7.
57. King, para. 10.
58. Falwell, para. 16.
59. James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 85.

60. Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995).
61. *Ibid.*, 30-31.
62. *Ibid.*, 81.
63. *Ibid.*
64. *Ibid.*, 31.
65. *Ibid.*, 106.
66. Falwell, para. 16.
67. Lee, 78.
68. Lee, 131.
69. King, para. 14.
70. Lee, 140.
71. Lee, 153.
72. John Marciano, *Civic Illiteracy and Education: A Battle for the Hearts and Minds of American Youth* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 21.
73. Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016); Rachel Zoll, "Trump's Ability to Attract Evangelical Voters Confounds Analysts," *PBS NewsHour*, 6 March 2016, <<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/trumps-ability-to-attract-evangelical-voters-confounds-analysts>>.
74. While it can be argued that the economically marginalized among white evangelicals might have sought to destroy the traditional center (political and economic elites) that ignored them for so long (see Eugene Scott, "White Working-Class Evangelicals: Christian Values are Under Attack," CNN, 24 September 2016, <<https://www.cnn.com/2016/09/24/politics/white-working-class-evangelicals/>>), the voting pattern of white evangelicals—81% for Trump to Clinton's 16% (see Gregory A. Smith and Jessica Martínez, "How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis," Pew Research Center, 9 November 2016, <<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/>>)—shows that many were willing to create a new center around Trump's promises and themselves, even at the cost of the marginalization of others both inside and outside of the evangelical church.
75. Zoll, "Trump's Ability to Attract Evangelical Voters Confounds Analysts."
76. Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 217-218.
77. Although there are evangelicals who may identify as "progressive" or "left," more such evangelicals need to move beyond prayers for the president, or the assurance in "a sovereign Lord [who] can change the hearts of kings" (Ravi Zacharias, "Apologetics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," speech delivered at Saddleback Church, Lake Forest, California, 6 November 2016, Saddleback Church Sermon Library), to a firmer stance and action for what they perceive as right and wrong.
78. Falwell, para. 14.
79. Rick Warren, Saddleback Church press release, 2006.
80. Falwell, para. 16.
81. Michael W. Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum*, third ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 6.
82. *Ibid.*, 6.