Introduction

Though Christianity portrays itself as a force for good in the world, the actual story is much more complex. For the last seventeen centuries, ruling elites have used Christian institutions and values to control, exploit and violate people in most regions throughout the world.

Today, in the 21st century, Christianity is still a dominant force in our society. Yet why is it so hard to pinpoint? What words can we use to describe it? Buried even deeper than policies and actions of institutions, there seems to be a dominant Christian worldview that has shaped and skewed Western culture so profoundly that it is difficult to delineate fully. We have words for sexism, racism and economic inequality, but what would we even call the underlying, often hidden power of Christianity: Christianism? Christian dominance? Christian supremacy?

> This is no mere matter for the philosophy classroom. We face the possible or probable extinction of life on our planet. If we can, we must grasp the bias and limitation of the "West's" worldview, powered by a hegemony that makes us oblivious to the wisdom of the people of America's First Nations.[1]

As philosophy professor Bruce Wilshire suggests in the quote above, our understanding of the West's foundational beliefs matters greatly.

Within a Christian framework, we have witnessed a thousand years of Crusades against "evil" non-Christians, those branded as primitives, savages or terrorists, with results most currently manifesting in the US's Middle Eastern wars. Within this framework, all

those labeled Other have been marginalized and are vulnerable to violence.

When I began to write on this subject, I often wondered why it was so hard for people to understand both the history and the contemporary reality of Christianity's impact on our lives. It seemed that we were completely surrounded by its influence but couldn't see it. I finally realized there was one word that helped to describe this impact and its invisibility: hegemony.

Hegemony is defined as the predominant and pervasive influence of one state, religion, region, class or group. For example, the Fontana *Dictionary of Modern Thought* defines hegemony as "not only the political and economic control exercised by a dominant class but its success in projecting its own way of seeing the world, human and social relationships, so that this is accepted as 'common sense' and part of the natural order by those who are, in fact, subordinated to it." [2]

A hegemonic society functions not just to establish a homogeneous way of thinking, but also to try to make any alternative disappear. It tries to maintain the illusion that within its sphere there is only one unified and true way of understanding the world or leading one's life.

This predominant influence can take different forms of control. But despite usually intense resistance, over time the worldview of the conquerors is internalized. It becomes accepted as natural and inevitable even by those dominated, although it is not in their best interests. One might say hegemony is "the language of conquest." [3]

What Is Christian Hegemony?

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

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

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

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

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

mobilized constituents to vote for Proposition 8 on the California ballot—a 2008 measure that made same-sex marriage illegal.[3]

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

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

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

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

Interpersonal effects include specific acts of aggression directed at those who are not Christian or Christian of the wrong sort, e.g., people who are LGBTTQ.[8]

The institutional effects show up in the ways the health care, educational and criminal legal systems favor Christians and Christian values and treat others as outside society's circle of caring. For example, most institutional policies privilege Christian holidays and cultural norms, treating other religions' practices as unusual

and therefore easily dismissed. The levels of this institutionalized system of dominance are interconnected, so the cumulative impact creates a structure that is all-encompassing.

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

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

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

For example, for centuries Christianity was committed to nonviolence, to the value of Jesus's life, not his death, exalting his resurrection rather than his crucifixion. He was not imagined or portrayed dead on the cross as a martyr, but alive as a healer and teacher. Creating paradise on Earth, in the here and now, was the primary goal of Christians, not waiting for salvation in some future time or place.[10] Women had leadership positions in the early

church, homosexuality was accepted,[11] and war was condemned. In fact, Roman soldiers were not allowed by the early church to be baptized and become Christians.[12]

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

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

As former executive director of the Oregon Holocaust Resource Center Michael Steele has written:

> Christianity has, for more than seventeen centuries, constituted the primary culture, or has been a major determinant of Western culture, by which hundreds of millions, perhaps billions, of believing Christians have had their most deeply held beliefs formulated. Scripture, scripture commentary, homilies, papal bulls, decretals, the arts, formal and domestic forms of education, government decrees, law, and countless sermons, pamphlets, disputations, tracts, and books constitute the discourse within which those believing millions have lived. This discourse field provides the culture and the people within it "with 'taken-for-granted elements' of their 'practical knowledge,'" thus creating a "common sense" that "is rarely made explicit, and is often in fact unconscious."[13]

The impact on people who are not Christian but who live inside Christian-dominated cultures is, perhaps, more complex as we are forced to resist the constant aggressive pressure to accept the dominant worldview. Inevitably some of those influences are internalized, others are rejected and still others are synthesized with non-Christian beliefs and values. (Santeria[14] and some forms of African-American and Native American Christianity are examples of syntheses.) Although those not Christian or who have rejected Christianity might like to believe we are not influenced by its dominance, few, if any of us, can resist completely.

Christian hegemony remains strong partly because its values are so tightly woven into our media, textbooks and popular culture that they are often unnoticed, even by those who produce them. For instance, many Disney animated films are based on a simple moral framework of good versus evil in which an innocent young woman gets held hostage by evil, dark others and needs to be rescued by a white[15] savior. Other cultures are portrayed as barbaric,[16] requiring a change in historical facts (for example *Pocahontas* and *Mulan*) to show that good always triumphs over evil.

Christian hegemony is pervasive not only in popular culture but also in academic and political thinking. Samuel Huntington, whose influential book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* has reframed the post-cold war world into an inevitable cosmic war between good and evil,[17] wrote in 2004:

> "The cement in the structure of this great nation" is the "product of the distinct Anglo-Protestant culture of the founding settlers of America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries," a culture whose "key elements" include "the English language; Christianity; religious commitment; English concepts of the rule of law, the responsibility of rulers, and the rights of individuals; and dissenting Protestant values of individualism, the work ethic, and the belief that humans have the ability and the duty to try to create a heaven on earth, a 'city on a hill.'"[18]

These assumptions, used to justify war and exploitation, are then internalized to excuse interpersonal violence. You are probably aware of Christian religious leaders from many denominations who promote policies against women's reproductive and civil rights, while promoting war against Muslims, "godless" communists and other non-Christians based on religious differences.

I believe that the trauma from the legacy of such past and current violence committed in the name of Christianity often makes it difficult to even talk about its source or impact. For instance, fear (in addition to the great power of the church in many people's lives) is part of what made it so hard for people to come forward in recent years to confront Catholic and Protestant church leaders who committed child abuse.

Frequently, discussions of Christian power or values focus exclusively on conservative Fundamentalists or Evangelicals. These groups constitute a powerful force. However, focusing on them without reference to mainstream Christian dominance is similar to talking about the KKK and neo-Nazi groups without addressing the broader issues of institutional racism and white power. Defining extremists as an aberration leaves the mainstream unexamined and gives Christianity itself a deceptively benign status.

To paraphrase scholar Steven Salaita, the notion that the Crusades, the Inquisition, Witch Burnings, the Trail of Tears, Lynchings, My Lai, Haditha or Abu Ghraib were merely anomalies undertaken by isolated groups of rogue warriors, or were isolated historical events no longer relevant to our lives, is an insult to our moral integrity.[19] These events were part of a centuries-long process that included the dehumanization of anyone perceived as dangerous from a Christian perspective.

Just as this book is not about Christianity, neither is it about individual Christian beliefs and spiritual practices. If you are Christian you might feel a need to defend your religion or religious practice. You might want to say that "that" Christianity is not "my" Christianity.

Just as I, a man who does not adhere to the principles of patriarchy, need to be vigilant in challenging the systems that perpetuate it, I invite well-intended Christians to challenge the larger system of Christian dominance. Since I work to end male violence and the exploitation of women, I might be tempted to say that I have rejected patriarchy and now stand against it. Yet I still benefit from male privilege. I still (often unwittingly) collude with the exploitation of women (Who made my clothes? Who made my computer?), and I still have to continually challenge internalized forms of male entitlement and superiority in myself. So, too, may Christians make a significant positive difference by acknowledging the existence of Christian dominance, recognizing the ways you benefit and working to dismantle it.

None of us created the system of patriarchy or the forms of Christian hegemony that we live within. We are, however, responsible for our responses to them, for the way we show up in the struggle to build a just society designed on cooperation and interdependence with all life.

This task is urgent for all of us—Christians, former Christians, people of other belief systems and spiritual practices and those who practice no religion. The ways we think and act can't help but be influenced by living within a society governed through the use and manipulation of Christianity. Until we change our collective worldview, we will recreate systems that produce war, interpersonal violence and environmental destruction.

However overwhelming it might seem to challenge a hegemonic system, it is also important to remember, as historian Richard Slotkin puts it, that "no system of cultural hegemony, no matter how perfect its monopoly of the instruments of cultural production, is impervious to the effects of cultural or social change…no mythic system can be perfectly invulnerable to the rebuke of events."[20] It is up to us to expose those vulnerabilities, so we can co-create a world better fitting our needs and the needs of all life.