

Punching Nazis? Preaching as Anti-Fascist Resistance¹

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Abstract

In this essay I examine contours of fascism and anti-fascism through which we must interpret the current political climate in the USA. I suggest that anti-fascist preaching is a necessary response to fascism and proto-fascism, and I press for more aggressive, illiberal homiletical responses in the age of Trump. In order to meet a minimal definition of homiletical anti-fascist resistance, as I define it, preachers and homileticians need to actively, explicitly preach and lead in ways that intentionally render churches dangerous places for racist, fascist or proto-fascist expression – and perhaps simultaneously render them havens for those who are the targets of racism, fascism and proto-fascism. If Christian preaching had been intentionally and explicitly anti-racist and anti-fascist throughout the past century, the present political situation in which we find ourselves and the scars of fascism which haunt our country and the world might look much differently today.²

On the evening of Friday, August 11, Richard Spencer, leader of the self-styled “alt-right,” a far-right, neo-fascist movement espousing nationalism and white supremacy, along with over two hundred followers, mostly young white males, many from middle-class upbringings, decided to kick-off the following day’s widely publicized white nationalist rally by marching through the University of Virginia’s campus carrying TIKI[®] Torches and shouting racist and anti-Semitic slogans such as, “You will not replace us,” and, “Jews will not replace us.”³ As images spread across social and traditional media, a significant number of counter-protestors mobilized in response. On the following day, Saturday, August 12, white nationalists clashed with these counter-protestors,

¹ Here I am indebted to a conversation with my colleague, *Chris Baker*, who characterized my argument using these rather pithy and direct words, “punching Nazis.”

² This essay was originally presented in the Word and Worship seminar of the North American Academy of Liturgy on January 10, 2018 in Vancouver, British Columbia.

³ I initially define fascism deploying political theorist *Roger Griffin’s* „fascist minimum“ in which fascism is an illiberal, revolutionary ideology or mass movement characterized by palingenetic, populist ultra-nationalism. I also must note that here and throughout the essay I will employ “neo-fascist” as simply a reference to contemporary, post-WWII fascists who I may also simply refer to as fascists. Cf. White Nationalists March on University of Virginia, in: *The New York Times*, August 11, 2017.

among whom were clergy, Black Lives Matter protestors, student activists, and self-styled antifa protestors who attempted to shut down the rally. As law enforcement officials refused to intervene, brutal clashes between the white nationalists and counter-protestors ensued, leaving many persons seriously injured and one counter-protestor dead – killed by a neo-Nazi sympathizer.

One of the counter-protestors was Cornel West, a prominent philosopher, activist and social critic. In a later media interview he recounted a moment on that Saturday when twenty clergy, who were singing “This little light of mine,” were left unprotected by law enforcement at a crucial moment when white supremacists directly threatened their physical safety. West stated that if not for the sudden appearance of three hundred to three hundred and fifty “anti-fascist” protestors the clergy would have been “crushed like cockroaches.”⁴ He credited the antifascists, who were willing to physically defend the clergy, with saving their lives.⁵ He described the encounter:

The white supremacy was so intense. I’ve never seen that kind of hatred in my life. We stood there, and nine units went by, and looking right in our eyes. And they’re cussing me out, and so forth and so on. They’re lucky I didn’t lose my holy ghost, to tell you the truth, because I wanted to start swinging myself. I’m a Christian, but not a pacifist, you know [...]. And the beautiful thing is the fightback. It was a beautiful thing to see all the people coming back [...].⁶

West’s account vividly recounts two approaches to resisting neo-fascists, those who punched the Nazis – what West calls “fightback” – and those who resisted while employing nonviolent strategies.⁷

I am deploying West’s account as the starting point of this essay for several reasons. 1) The scene that West describes is not an isolated incident. Clashes between white-nationalist fascists and anti-fascist counter-protestors have occurred with a high degree of frequency since the election of President Donald J. Trump. 2) The encounter between the counter-protestors and the white-nationalist fascists in Charlottesville is an example of two distinct approaches to anti-fascist resistance, and West’s story implicitly reveals the dilemmas embedded in each. On one hand, an unwillingness to punch Nazis – e.g. white-nationalist neo-fascists who admire or express nostalgia for the former National Socialist party – on the part of anti-fascist protestors can possibly lead to grave injury and a failure to effectively disrupt white nationalist rallies. On the other hand, a

⁴ Cf. https://www.democracynow.org/2017/8/14/cornel_west_rev_toni_blackmon_clergy: *Cornel West and Rev. Travi Blackmon, Clergy in Charlottesville Were Trapped by Torch-Wielding Nazis*. Democracy Now!; August 14, 2017 [accessed on December 22, 2017].

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ I am using “Nazi” here as an abbreviation of “neo-Nazi” and stand-in for post-WWII white-nationalist, neo-fascists who express nostalgia for Nazi Germany.

willingness to punch Nazis runs contrary to both widely-held ethics and social sensibilities, emphasizing compliance and non-violence.⁸ 3) West's account raises to consciousness an unspoken but significant ethical question: "Should we punch Nazis or not?" I will employ this question as a theme throughout this constructive essay on preaching as anti-fascist resistance, because it solidly frames the conversation within the boundaries of anti-fascism. By framing this essay around the theme of "punching Nazis" it is not necessarily my goal to get all Christian preachers to engage in physical confrontation of white nationalists – though an anti-fascist homiletic cannot exclude this possibility. However, I am suggesting that all Christian preachers need to, at the very minimum, be engaged in active homiletical resistance to fascism and proto-fascism that at the very least packs a significant punch. In doing so, I am attempting to position this anti-fascist homiletic in a manner that is not easily co-opted into mealy-mouthed, white, liberal complacency while our black, brown and Jewish brothers and sisters are threatened with increasingly emboldened white-nationalist fascism.

The primary research question guiding this essay is: what are the basic contours necessary for preaching to function as anti-fascist resistance in the Trump era? In order to address this primary question, I will critically engage sources in fascism theory and anti-fascism, identifying initial contours of fascism and anti-fascism. From this initial analysis of fascism and anti-fascism, I will identify the minimum contours of anti-fascist preaching.

This task is not without numerous potential pitfalls and challenges. The terms "fascism" and "fascist" have, on the popular level, lost a specificity of meaning. For some time, the term has been used loosely as a catch-all pejorative by politicians and pundits on the left; however, recently pundits on the right have also begun to deploy the term as a means of discrediting their more politically progressive opponents – e.g. Rush Limbaugh's popularization of "feminazi." In order to avoid the potential pitfall, I intentionally ground this work in a limited survey of fascism studies which provides foundation for robust analysis moving beyond pejoratives.

I am writing this essay primarily to mainline Christians, who are, whether they are conscious of it or not, deeply formed in and committed to Western liberalism, not just politically, economically, and socially but also religiously.⁹ Each and every one of us approaches the topic of fascism with vested social, political, and economic interests related to the liberal status quo and its accompanying disparities which fascism and proto-fascism exploit. This represents a significant

⁸ Here I must note that I am suspicious of the widely held "non-violence" of many privileged persons in our country which is too often more accurately interpreted as inactive neutrality.

⁹ As I employ the term "liberal" or "liberalism," unless otherwise indicated could be used interchangeably with "neo-liberal" or "neo-liberalism." Unless otherwise indicated I am referring to philosophical and economic liberalism as opposed to theological liberalism.

challenge to my anti-fascist effort on several levels. Western liberalism and its accompanying political, economic, and social crises are always the sites out of which fascism emerges and without which fascism could not exist. By implication, the degree to which our religiosity – and for the sake of this article, our preaching – is informed by and beholden to philosophical and economic liberalism – and their embedded contradictions – is the degree to which our religiosity and preaching themselves function as part and parcel of the liberal status quo to which fascism reacts. The challenge I face here is to prompt my readers to not only identify fascism and proto-fascism but to identify how they are connected economically, politically, and socially to the systemic crises which fascist or proto-fascist ideologies, movements or regimes exploit.

To state this explicitly, anti-fascism requires that we not only condemn fascism but also the liberal status quo from which it emerges. In this sense, my constructive work will only be effective to the degree that it prompts and equips liberal Christian preachers to work both to overcome the serial ineptitude of liberalism in halting the rise of fascism through active resistance and to be more critically-engaged liberals who offer up alternative revolutionary visions for the reformation of economic and social liberalism. This is a significant challenge, because I am suggesting that preachers must actively work against the current social and political order and must do so in ways that the current social and political order actively conditions them to avoid.

1. Contours of Fascism

Academic discourse surrounding the definition of “fascism” has been controversial and heavily debated.¹⁰ The term “fascism” is an anglicization of the Italian term *fascismo* emerging during the rise of Mussolini’s *Partito Fascista Rivoluzionario* (Fascist Revolutionary Party) and its successor, the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* (National Fascist Party). While in our contemporary consciousness Italian fascism pales in notoriety compared to its close chronological and geographical neighbor, the *Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (German Workers Party) and its successor, the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (National Socialist German Workers Party or Nazi Party) led by Adolph Hitler, Hitler’s rise to power and subsequent regime was not widely or formally identified as “fascist” until Ernst Nolte’s book, *Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche* (*Fascism in Its Epoch*), was published in 1963.¹¹

In this work, Nolte defined fascism as an ideological reaction against modernity, including liberalism, capitalism, the *bourgeois*, and communism in an innovative way that more clearly distinguished Nazi Germany from the Soviet Union and more closely related it to Mussolini’s “*fascista*.” Nolte’s book was pivotal for fascism studies, because he was the first to attempt to define

¹⁰ Here I employ quotation marks to indicate that I am examining “fascism” as a term.

¹¹ „Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche“ was translated into English in 1966 as “The Three Faces of Fascism”. Cf. *Ernst Nolte, Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche*, Darmstadt 1990, and id., *Three Faces of Fascism*. Action Française, Italian Fascism, National Socialism, Virginia 1970.

fascism, or what he called “generic fascism,” in an exhaustive manner that connected several different political ideologies and mass movements under the shared label of fascism.¹² This contribution of a generic theory of fascism profoundly shaped late-twentieth century discourse in fascism studies particularly by expanding the phenomenon of fascism beyond Mussolini’s regime and suggesting that multiple manifestations of fascist regimes could be grappled with simultaneously.

Emerging out of the new analytical possibilities opened by Nolte’s generic fascism was the allure of the potential identification of a universal definition or identification of universal dimensions of fascism. A notable example is Roger Griffin’s work in *The Nature of Fascism*, in which Griffin suggested that all fascisms have shared characteristics which he identifies as “the fascist minimum.” He defined the fascist minimum as a “political ideology” that is a “palingenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism.”¹³

The first primary contour of fascism emerging out of Griffin’s definition is *palingenesis*, the concept of rebirth, renewal or recreation. This rebirth and the revolutionary process which it entails is what Griffin calls the “mythic core” of fascism. Instead of a mythic core related to a highly-developed philosophy capable of sustaining a regime over a sustained period of time, at the heart of fascism is the rallying cry of palingenesis. This is to say that rebirth is perhaps, in some sense, the extent of the philosophy of fascism. However, this leads to critical problems around the sustainability of fascisms. By emphasizing the revolutionary struggle for rebirth against corruption and decay on the part of heroic elites, fascisms constantly require enemies, real or imagined, against which they can direct their revolutionary fervor. Constant rebirth and the revolutionary struggle which it represents is simply not politically, economically, or socially sustainable.¹⁴

The second primary contour is that of *populism*, any system or agent that claims to be in support of ordinary folk and which relies upon those ordinary people for their support. Griffin defines populism, “as a generic term for political forces, which, even if led by small elite cadres or self-appointed ‘vanguards’, in practice or in principle (and not merely for show) depend on ‘people power’ as the basis of their legitimacy.”¹⁵ Populism tends to be a bottom-up, groundswell approach to politics reliant upon the mass power of ordinary folk but susceptible to exploitation by elites who have agendas that might actually be detrimental to ordinary folk.

¹² Here by “universal” I am characterizing his work as a comprehensive definition that can be applied across fascisms.

¹³ Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, London 2016, 51.

¹⁴ Within the contemporary context of the USA, this is evocative of Trump’s slogan of “Make America great again!” and “Drain the swamp” which have not translated well into governing agendas.

¹⁵ Griffin (note 13), 36f.

Though carefully disguised in the guise of populism, elitism is at the core of fascist ideology. The notion of rebirth and ultra-nationalism are both implicitly elitist. In being reborn out of decay and corruption, fascist mythology necessarily suggests that the nation becomes superior to that which it left behind and those other nations surrounding it, and ultra-nationalism implicitly invokes an international elitism necessary to support calls for domination of the world order. Griffin notes how fascisms typically have both a “paramilitary elite” and “the leader figure.”¹⁶ These elites provide the hero figures necessary for fascist mythology, staff the political hierarchy of fascism, and support the potentially totalitarian leader at the center of the mythology.

The third primary contour from Griffin’s fascist minimum is that of *ultra-nationalism*. Nationalism here is understood in the same sense as patriotism. However, this is distinct from ultra-nationalism. Griffin defines ultra-nationalism as, “forms of nationalism which ‘go beyond’, and hence reject, anything compatible with liberal institutions or with the tradition of the Enlightenment humanism which underpins them.”¹⁷ This is to say that ultra-nationalism emphasizes supremacy and domination. The practical manifestation of ultra-nationalism if allowed to seize power is the creation and assertion of a world order in which many nations are dominated by or viewed as inferior to a single nation or an elite circle of nations. Ultra-nationalism has often been, but is not necessarily, combined in some fascisms with strong emphasis upon militarism, the means by which not only is revolutionary rebirth made possible but also by which a new world order can be asserted.

In addition to the threefold dimensions of Griffin’s fascist minimum, I must name an additional potential characteristic of fascisms as it relates to the primary contours identified above.¹⁸ This is the problem of fascist racism.¹⁹ While popular images of the Nazi-organized Holocaust might suggest that all fascisms are racist, some have not been so overtly racist. This is to say that racism is not a minimum dimension of fascism; however, when racism is combined with fascism the effects can be horrendous. Griffin suggests that the degree to which a particular fascism is racist is largely dependent on pre-existing cultural dynamics. He writes, “The virulence and object of fascist racism will depend on contingent factors, especially the prior existence of a tradition of xenophobic obsessions and racial persecution which the movement can incorporate as an integral part of its palingenetic vision and as an instrument of mass mobilization.”²⁰

¹⁶ Ibid., 42.

¹⁷ Ibid., 37.

¹⁸ In doing so, I am not suggesting that these potential characteristics are my contribution of an innovative supplemented fascist minimum.

¹⁹ This is not meant to imply that liberal racism is not a problem.

²⁰ *Griffin* (note 13), 48. Numerous scholars agree that fascism is a symptom of liberalism, a philosophy promoting freedom and individualism. Western liberalism has been accompanied by economic emphasis upon the individual manifested in *laissez-faire* economics. Fascisms tap into popular resentment of liberalism and its tendency to privilege

2. Contours of Anti-fascism

The same challenges that arise in the defining of fascism arise in the defining of anti-fascism. The term “anti-fascism” was also created by Mussolini’s *Fascista* political party for those who opposed it, and the term is, in a specific sense, specific to Italian politics in the early twentieth century. However, as identification and analysis of fascism has developed to acknowledge the challenge of fascisms, so too, the potential meanings of “anti-fascism” have broadened, allowing for anti-fascisms.

As anti-fascisms emerged throughout the twentieth century, across Europe and North America, in direct response to neo-fascist and neo-Nazi groups each particular manifestation of anti-fascism has been uniquely shaped by its political and cultural locale.²¹ As such, the ideological commitments and resistance tactics employed have been diverse. In *Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook*, Mark Bray describes two poles representing the variety of possible anti-fascist tactics, writing, “Some antifa focus on destroying fascist organizing, others focus on building popular community power and inoculating society to fascism through promoting their leftist political vision.”²² This ideological and tactical diversity is further complicated, because there are both self-identifying anti-fascist groups and activist groups which engage in anti-fascist activity without the name or perhaps even without recognizing that their activism is directly or indirectly anti-fascist.

In order to speak of anti-fascisms in a generic sense, I am arguing for an *anti-fascist minimum* paralleling Griffin’s fascist minimum. As I define it, the anti-fascist minimum is active resistance to palingenetic, populist ultra-nationalism. This minimum allows for ideological and tactical diversity, and it also illustrates how anti-fascism is necessarily closely related to the fascism which it opposes. Fascism is a revolutionary ideology which must become a mass movement in order to successfully form a regime. Anti-fascism also presupposes ideological commitments – albeit potentially varied and contrary to those of fascism – which, in order to successfully prohibit the formation of a fascist regime, must also garner popular support in order to be effective.²³

the *bourgeois* and upper class while harming the working class, persons of non-dominant races, and the poor. Exploiting these conditions, fascisms emphasize revolutionary rebirth, a concept to which frustrated working class and poor persons will be susceptible, gain widespread populist support and may even successfully seize power. Herein lies a deceit of fascism. While relying upon populism in order to gain power, scholars widely agree that the populist efforts of fascism misdirect from its core elitist nature. Having gained power through populism, fascism shifts into totalitarianism, dictatorial, top-down political systems which require strict obedience. Racism is connected to two of the primary contours, rebirth and ultra-nationalism. In the process of rebirth, those who are deemed racially – or perhaps using other demographic factors – inferior become the enemy to be expelled or destroyed, providing continued energy for the revolutionary process. Fascist racism can also be expressed internationally in the ways that countries of one dominant ethnicity and culture relate to other countries of another dominant ethnicity and culture.

²¹ An example in the USA is the Anti-Racist Action Network (ARA).

²² Mark Bray, *Antifa. The Anti-Fascist Handbook*, Brooklyn 2017, xvi.

²³ Many anti-fascists are Marxist or anarchist.

Each manifestation of anti-fascism may take on additional characteristics depending on the nature of the fascism which they are resisting. In the context of the United States of America in which fascism is deeply rooted in the horrific legacy of white supremacy, a context-specific anti-fascist minimum—referring to any anti-fascist effort within the context of the USA—is that anti-fascism in this context is active resistance to palingenetic, populist ultra-nationalism and its manifestation in white supremacy. Bray identifies resistance to white supremacy as the defining strategic goal of which anti-fascist efforts in the USA are a part, writing, “For this reason, it is vital to understand anti-fascism as a solitary component of a larger legacy of resistance to white supremacy in all its forms.”²⁴

A crucial point for the liberal reader to understand is that anti-fascism is no less revolutionary than fascism. It necessarily envisions a radically different way of being in the world apart from the status quo of Western liberalism complete with its embedded political, economic, and social disparities. While defining the negative characteristics of resistance to fascism well, the inherently negative term, “anti-fascism,” is a poor representation of the positive, revolutionary dimensions of anti-fascism that are necessary to eliminate not just fascism but also its political, economic, and social causes in Western liberalism through which death has been systematized, rendered less visible, and spread out over time.²⁵ This is to say that anti-fascists focus not only on resisting fascism but on positively presenting more viable and just social, political, and economic alternatives. Bray writes:

Most of the anti-fascists I interviewed also spend a great deal of their time on other forms of politics (e.g. labor organizing, squatting, environmental activism, antiwar mobilization, or migrant solidarity work). In fact, the vast majority would rather devote their time to these productive activities than to have to risk their safety and well-being to confront dangerous neo-Nazis and white supremacists.²⁶

Bray’s engagement with anti-fascists reveals two important characteristics of anti-fascism: 1) Anti-fascism can be expressed in direct resistance to fascism, and 2) anti-fascism must exist alongside revolutionary work offering up viable alternatives to fascism and the status quo of Western liberalism. Renton implies that the problem with fascism is not its radical nature; rather, we need radical answers that employ the ideals of liberalism in a truly just manner. He writes, “The only way to break workers and small owners from fascism is through demonstrating the appeal of a different radical answer to the question of what has to be done.”²⁷ Ultimately, any response to fascism or proto-

²⁴ Bray (note 22), xvi.

²⁵ Here I am thinking of Foucault’s notion of “biopower” and Rob Nixon’s notion of “slow violence.”

²⁶ Bray (note 22), xvi.

²⁷ Dave Renton, *Fascism: Theory and Practice*, London 2015, 111. This is evocative of philosopher [Slavoj Žižek’s argument that Hitler was not truly revolutionary.](#)

fascism will be ineffective and ultimately fail to address the causes of fascism if it does not present a suitably revolutionary alternative.

Like fascism, anti-fascism is also a somewhat illiberal revolutionary movement; however, unlike fascism, anti-fascism's illiberal dimensions can reflect a genuine effort to live up to the ideals of liberalism.²⁸ This is the third characteristic of anti-fascism, which I wish to highlight. It pushes against the liberal notion – and perhaps conceit – of free speech. As people who believe that fascism represents a terrifying danger to democracy, anti-fascists believe that fascism should not be allowed to be publicly promoted. When fascist and proto-fascist persons inevitably strive for and gain political standing or civic office within right-wing politics, what Alexander Ross labels the “fascist creep,” it is the goal of some anti-fascists to remove their platform to speak and ability to organize. Bray states the reasoning behind the removal of a public platform, writing, “After Auschwitz and Treblinka, anti-fascists committed themselves to fighting to the death the ability of organized Nazis to say anything.”²⁹

The “no platforming” characteristic of anti-fascism is crucial.³⁰ One of the revolutionary tactics of fascism, which anti-fascism seeks to disrupt, is the historical use of mass rallies to solidify popular support. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler described the power of these rallies in giving individual working class persons confidence in voicing their fascist beliefs upon joining thousands of others at a rally who held the same beliefs, and Hitler also observed that the only way the Nazi revolution could have been thwarted was if opposing parties had disrupted their early rallies.³¹ It is important to note that anti-fascists are not opposed either to the right to speak freely or to the right to freely assemble. Rather, no platforming efforts are an attempt to live into and preserve the ideals of free speech and freedom to assemble.

Fascism and proto-fascism are not just expressed in instances of mass rallies during which nostalgia for the Nazi party is expressed. Fascism and proto-fascism are operative in the mundane dimensions of our lives. Bray compares what he calls “organized anti-fascism,” with “everyday anti-fascism” noting the importance of each. In offering up the notion of everyday anti-fascism, Bray is attempting to counteract what I call the overt or covert *micro-fascisms* that we encounter as we go through our lives. He describes these, writing:

Everyday fascists are the ardent Trump supporters who “tell it like it is” by actively trying to dismantle the taboos against oppression that the movements of feminism, black

²⁸ I say “can” here, because some anti-fascists are anarchist.

²⁹ Bray (note 22), xv.

³⁰ Ibid., 26.

³¹ Cf. *Adolf Hitler*, *Mein Kampf*, Munich 21927, 530, and id., *Die Reden Hitlers am Reichsparteitag 1933*, München 1934, 41.

liberation, queer liberation, and others have given actual blood, sweat, and tears to establish as admittedly shoddy, and far too easily manipulatable, bulwarks against outright fascism.³²

As Bray describes everyday fascism, active resistance to fascism is not simply expressed in physical brutality against large groups of white supremacists; an anti-fascist commitment to actively resist fascism must be manifested relationally and publicly day-in and day-out. Even those who have an anti-fascist commitment but who are not part of an anti-fascist organization can take part in this type of anti-fascism. Bray describes this daily resistance:

Any time someone takes action against transphobic, racist bigots – from calling them out, to boycotting their business, to shaming them for their oppressive beliefs, to ending a friendship unless someone shapes up – they are putting an anti-fascist outlook into practice that contributes to a broader everyday anti-fascism that pushes back the tide against the alt-right, Trump, and his loyal supporters. Our goal should be that in twenty years those who voted for Trump are too uncomfortable to share that fact in public. We may not always be able to change someone’s beliefs, but we sure as hell can make it politically, socially, economically, and sometimes physically costly to articulate them.³³

Bray’s notion of rendering everyday fascism “costly” can be applied universally to fascism. A strategy – not a tactic – of anti-fascism is to render fascism in all of its forms too costly not only on the personal level, but also to render it too costly on the organized, national level. Only when a person or organization is in the process of rendering fascism costly can they be truly labeled anti-fascist.

A fourth characteristic of anti-fascism in the USA is anti-racism. In much the same sense that Bray understands the strategy of rendering fascism too costly, so too anti-racism must be a dimension of anti-fascist efforts – this does not minimize resistance to other dimensions of fascism. At the heart of fascism is elitism, and at the heart of fascism in the USA is, among other elitisms, a racial elitism connected to the long and brutal history of white supremacy in the USA. Within the context of anti-immigrant racism, Renton argues that we cannot simply tell folk that “racism is bad;” rather, we must “respond by showing that unemployment is the product of a capitalist crisis, not immigration. The solution to unemployment is not to get rid of the immigrants but to get rid of the economic system which produces misery.”³⁴ Any progressive political, economic, and social alternatives to fascist or proto-fascist efforts in the USA must incorporate anti-racism.³⁵ Renton

³² *Bray* (note 22), 204.

³³ *Ibid.*, 206.

³⁴ *Renton* (note 27), 112.

³⁵ It is important to observe that 1 in 10 *Bernie Sanders* voters ended up voting for *Trump*.

also suggests that anti-fascist efforts against racism must reach out into rural, white locales.³⁶ As Renton describes it, racism is a “gateway drug” to fascism. He writes:

Exposure and education are the bread-and-butter tasks of anti-fascism, but these need to be properly understood. Fascism only becomes a threat when it gains an ideological hold over numbers of people. Moreover, most fascist organizations do not spread a public message of classical Nazism; such ideas exist at the core, but for the inner circle only. Publicly, fascists pose as nationalists or racists – therefore, anti-fascists should not simply expose fascism for what it truly is, they must also spread a broader message of anti-racism. When so doing, anti-fascists should also recognize that there are many features of our society which encourage racism to flourish.³⁷

Addressing racism is a key component of anti-fascism, and anti-racism must be interpreted in the same sense as anti-fascism’s imposition of a cost. We are only truly anti-racist when we are rendering racism costly to those who engage in racist behavior.

A final characteristic which has not always been well-implemented within anti-fascist movements is the need for self-critique. In her essay, “Women and Antifascism,” Isabelle Richet illustrates how women have played a large role in anti-fascist resistance but are marginalized in subsequent narratives. She argues that anti-fascist groups’ narratives of themselves were shaped by embedded sexism, emphasizing the role of the males while deemphasizing or ignoring the role of the females. In addition, she notes how anti-fascist narratives tend to emphasize the fighters while minimizing or ignoring those who resisted fascism in ways that did not employ direct, physical brutality. I introduce Richet’s argument here as a way of emphasizing that anti-fascism is not necessarily inherently moral nor are anti-fascisms necessarily above reflecting the sins of the liberal culture out of which they emerge. In anti-fascist resistance, anti-fascists still must account for the liberalism embedded within them complete with its economic, political, and social disparities, which are often drawn along the lines of gender, class, race, or culture. Christians who identify as anti-fascists – both protestants and Evangelicals – must account both for the sins of liberalism and for the roots of fascism which are embedded within our religious traditions in the taboos – e.g. heteronormativity, nationalism, racism, and sexism to name a few – upon which fascism feeds.

3. Preaching As Anti-Fascist Resistance

Anti-fascist Christian preaching within the context of the Trump era is any preaching that actively resists palingenetic, populist ultra-nationalism and its white supremacist manifestations. To put this

³⁶ *Renton* (note 27), 112.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

more bluntly, anti-fascist Christian preaching in the Trump era is preaching that homiletically “punches Nazis,” rendering fascism ecclesially – and hopefully by implication economically, socially, and politically – costly. In defining anti-fascist preaching as such, I am also implying that Christian preaching which does not pack a punch directed toward fascism is either a) fascist or proto-fascist “Christian” preaching or b) “Christian” preaching that has acquiesced to the political, economic, and social – i.e. the white, male, heteronormative – status quo of liberalism.

In lifting up this anti-fascist theme for Christian preaching I am intentionally attempting to provoke Christian preachers’ sensibilities regarding what constitutes “violence” and how that relates to Christian preaching.³⁸ Within the context of anti-black racism in the USA, I argue in *The Violence of Preaching: A Homiletical Ethic of Revolutionary Violence* that too often what is perceived as “non-violent,” white Christian preaching is silent on issues of racism.³⁹ While this silence may be interpreted as neutrality, silent, white Christian preaching is actually perpetrating a subtle, indirect racialized violence. I argue that for privileged persons within the context of anti-black racism – an unjust symptom of liberalism, preaching can never be separated from the realities of violence and is never truly “non-violent.” I raise this example, because I am suggesting that in the context of fascism, even in silence against fascism, preaching that is perceived to be neutral is still actually caught up in the violence of fascism by not actively resisting it.

Fascism and proto-fascism present us with an opportunity to reflect both on the ways in which violence is irrevocably imposed upon us by political, economic, and social systems and on the ways in which we must consciously or subconsciously determine which and whose violence with which we are willing to live. When confronted with fascism or proto-fascism, we simultaneously have violence imposed upon us – either the violence of fascism, liberalism, or resistance, and we are faced with choices about how we will negotiate that violence through compliance or resistance, each of which have violent implications. I argue that in the case of fascism, we cannot separate ourselves – or our preaching – from violence – either the violence imposed upon us or the ways in which we negotiate fascism.⁴⁰

4. An Anti-fascist Christology

The person and ministry of Jesus has frequently served as the foundation for constructive revolutionary Christian theologies and homiletics such as those contributed by liberation theology. This approach has also been employed in constructive revolutionary homiletics such as *The Word*

³⁸ I place violence in quotation marks to indicate a suspicion of the term.

³⁹ Cf. *Andrew Wymer, The Violence of Preaching: A Homiletical Ethic of Revolutionary Violence* (Ph.D. dissertation), Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary 2016.

⁴⁰ As my colleague *Chris Baker* observes, “We all have dirt on our hands. We just have to choose what dirt we can live with.”

Before the Powers by Charles Campbell in which Campbell argues for a homiletical ethic of non-violent resistance by appealing to a non-violent Jesus. With this in mind, I would be remiss in constructing a revolutionary homiletic not to engage the person and ministry of Jesus. However, to ground this particular constructive homiletic on an engagement with Jesus and anti-fascism represents a potential anachronism.

Jesus was certainly not an anti-fascist, and Jesus preceded fascism and liberalism by well over a millennium. Since I am deeply formed by this theological tradition of looking to Jesus, I will trace a very basic Christology engaging the person and ministry of Jesus with the contours of fascism: palingenetic, populist, ultra-nationalism. I will not claim that Jesus was an anti-fascist; however, I will argue that Jesus cannot be responsibly interpreted as a fascist – though there are “Christo-fascist” sects of Christianity. I will also argue that Jesus’ response to the powers of his day provides an example of how we must resist the powers of today.⁴¹

It could be argued that there are palingenetic dimensions in the biblical accounts of Jesus’ emphasis upon the coming Kingdom of God, in which God will reign over the whole world in a revolutionary new way. In Acts 1:6–8, immediately before the Ascension, the disciples ask Jesus what can be interpreted as a palingenetic question, saying, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” However, Jesus responds by redirecting them away from palingenesis, saying, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”⁴² I argue that this redirection is emblematic of a divergence between possible palingenetic dimensions of the Kingdom in biblical accounts of Jesus and fascist palingenesis. Unlike fascism which emphasizes the rebirth process without a comprehensive plan for continued governance, Jesus’ treatment of the Kingdom emphasizes the establishment of a sustainable and comprehensive future. Also, the bringing about of the reign of God is one that is forward-looking and not at what Griffin would call the “mythic core” of Jesus’ message.⁴³

Previously, I defined populism as any system or agent that claims to be in support of ordinary folk and which relies upon those ordinary people for their support. There are certainly dimensions of Jesus, the revolutionary, that could be considered populist. He was an ordinary person who stood in solidarity with and organized other ordinary people, including the poor and the socially marginalized. However, Jesus is not a populist in the same sense as the term is employed in regard

⁴¹ I use this imagery here in a way that evokes the work of *Charles Campbell* and *Walter Wink*.

⁴² All Scripture passages are taken from *The Holy Bible*. New Revised Standard Version, Nashville 1989.

⁴³ Cf. *Griffin* (note 13).

to fascism. First, Jesus did not rely upon ordinary people for his authority or legitimacy. When Jesus invokes authority he consistently sources that authority in God or ancient scriptures. Second, in John 6:15, Jesus intentionally thwarts a popular effort to install him as a civic authority, a clear effort to undermine the misguided popular swell of support which he experienced. Third, Jesus' popular support was only temporary. It dissipated and even turned into popular animosity as is illustrated by the pardoning of Barabbas at the behest of the crowd. The contrast between the populism of fascism and Jesus' populist dimensions is even clearer when the elitist deception of fascist populism is considered. Fascisms exploit populism and then proceed to undermine the power of the populace and assert a totalitarian state. This certainly cannot be said of Jesus.

The Gospels recount for us Jesus telling stories that can be interpreted as intentionally undermining Jewish ethnic and religious tribalism. These include the parable of the Good Samaritan and the healing of the centurion's servant. In the parable of the Good Samaritan and the account of the healing of the centurion's servant, Jesus lifts up religious and ethnic rivals of the Jewish people as heroic figures and exemplars of faith. Other, slightly unclear clues can be taken from additional passages such as the Great Commission when Jesus instructs his disciples to go to all nations or, on the negative side, when Jesus (Matthew 15) tells the Canaanite woman that he has only come for the "lost sheep of the house of Israel." He later changes his mind and heals her. While it is difficult to judge Jesus' relationship to nationalism, my reading of Jesus suggests that he held views and took actions regarding the tribalism of certain sects within first century Judaism that can in no way be adequately construed as parallel to contemporary fascist ultra-nationalism.

Following *The Politics of Jesus: Rediscovering the Revolutionary Nature of Jesus' Teachings and How They Have Been Corrupted* by Obery Hendricks, I interpret Jesus as a revolutionary figure committed to resisting oppressive powers and working for a new way of ordering society.⁴⁴ The Gospels indicate that Jesus stood against both the external evil of the occupying Roman empire and the internal evil of corrupt religious authorities. I argue that a Christological interpretation of Jesus today can safely offer up a vision of a Christ figure that resists social evils and provides a resource in efforts to revolutionize society. While I am not suggesting that Jesus was an anti-fascist, I am suggesting that the Christ figure can be understood as a resource for anti-fascism. However, I am hesitant to do so. This hesitancy emerges not from an unwillingness to suggest that Christ is a potential resource for anti-fascism, but from concern that such a suggestion could minimize how such a reading of Christ necessitates that Christ also be an anti-liberal. If Christ is not also intentionally read as an anti-liberal, then a reading of Christ as anti-fascist may potentially be done against the backdrop of

⁴⁴ Obery M. Hendricks, *The Politics of Jesus. Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Nature of the Teachings of Jesus and How They Have Been Corrupted*, New York 2006.

a liberal reading of Christ. If a liberal reading of Christ is the foundation upon which we read Christ as anti-fascist, then an anti-fascist reading of Christ may be functioning to maintain the liberal economic, political, and social status quo. Such a reading is unacceptable to me. A reading of Christ can only be an anti-fascist resource to the degree that the same reading of Christ is also a resource for the critique of the source of fascism in liberalism.⁴⁵

Even with an interpretation of Jesus as a revolutionary and Christ as an anti-fascist, I will be the first to admit that the Gospels do not recount for us the tales of a Jesus who punched the oppressor. However, Hendricks, who supports non-violent tactics but holds a hybrid position on violence – suggests that Jesus made the choice to employ what we now might call non-violent tactics out of an awareness of the danger that direct physical confrontation would present to himself and his people.⁴⁶ For Jesus, the use of what we now call non-violent tactics may have been a matter of life and death. For those of us with multiple layers of social privileges, our choices of tactics may be more numerous than those who are less privileged. For those of us with privilege, we may not tactically choose to physically punch a Nazi, but, if we are not, we must be finding ways to “punch Nazis,” to render being a fascist or proto-fascist exceedingly costly. As the anti-fascists described by Cornel West, we need to be on the front lines in all areas of resistance, using our privilege in ways that benefit and protect those around us.

5. Contours of Anti-fascist Preaching

In addition to Griffin’s *fascist minimum* and my earlier contribution of an *anti-fascist minimum* paralleling Griffin’s fascist minimum, I am suggesting that there is a *homiletical anti-fascist minimum*. As I define it, the homiletical anti-fascist minimum is active resistance to palingenetic, populist, ultra-nationalism, and, in the particular context of the USA, active resistance to white supremacy. This is the bare minimum of what is necessary in order for preaching to be considered anti-fascist.

An anti-fascist homiletic suggests that fascism or proto-fascism does not belong in the pulpit or the pew in addition to the public sphere, and if fascism or proto-fascism are identified in the pulpit, the pew, or the public sphere, an anti-fascist Christian preacher will use their preaching – and possibly other tactics – to actively disrupt fascism or proto-fascism. Employing Bray’s terminology, anti-fascist preaching will render fascism and proto-fascism ecclesially costly. In the context of an anti-fascist homiletic, the “no platforming” dimension of anti-fascism can be supplemented by adding a “no pulpit-ing,” a “no altar-ing,” or a “no sanctuary-ing” of fascism. An anti-fascist homiletic suggests that fascism and proto-fascism and their manifestations in white

⁴⁵ By “anti-liberal” I do not mean to imply that, like fascism, liberalism cannot be rendered more just and more effectively live into its ideals.

⁴⁶ *Hendricks* (note 44), 177.

supremacy have absolutely no place in the Church, and the Church's task is to make sure that such ideologies and movements have an ecclesial cost that renders them prohibitive.

Anti-fascist preaching, at least in the USA, must also necessarily be anti-racist preaching. Here anti-racism moves beyond simply "not racist" to aggressive resistance and disruption of racism both in the Church and in the broader culture. Anti-racist preaching renders racism ecclesially costly and leaves no question that racism is unacceptable in the Church and the world. Anti-racist preaching must be combined with anti-racist worship, which is celebrated in a manner that is wary of the ways in which our European liturgical traditions too often carry the residue of white supremacy, white normativity, and anti-semitism. In addition, anti-fascist preaching will preemptively address the other "taboos" which fascism often exploits including gender – e.g. queerness and transgender – and sexuality – e.g. lesbian, gay, and bisexual sexuality.

Earlier in this essay I noted how anti-fascism, like the fascism it opposes, must appeal to and mobilize large groups of people in order to successfully disrupt fascism. Anti-fascist preaching, if it is to effectively resist and disrupt fascism, must also mobilize and reach large groups of people. The militancy of anti-fascist preaching is only directed toward fascists and proto-fascists. In order to educate and mobilize, anti-fascist preaching must reach across barriers to those who perhaps were part of the initial populist groundswell, but who have become disillusioned. In the context of the USA, anti-fascist preaching is particularly needed in locations where white supremacy, fascism, and proto-fascism are mainstream and attractive responses to economic crises.

Anti-fascist preaching must also be revolutionary in nature. That is, it must offer up alternatives to fascism and proto-fascism that address economic, political, and social disparities that fascism and proto-fascism exploit. While these visions will be theological in nature, they must also be combined with political, economic, and social solutions. While William Barber II and other organizers have not labelled the Poor People's Campaign as anti-fascist, it is effectively functioning as an anti-fascist organization by calling out white supremacy and offering up an alternative vision for society.⁴⁷

Anti-fascist preaching presses the field of homiletics in an illiberal direction with which some homileticians may not be comfortable. Little work has been done on how to respond to the Trump era in preaching due to its chronological immediacy; however, Wes Allen published a hasty and brief homiletical response to Trump's election immediately after the election. In it he attempts to tread a fine line between prophetic witness and loving those across the political aisle. For Allen, a determining issue is one of the possibility of conversion. He writes:

⁴⁷ Cf. <https://poorpeoplescampaign.org>.

Being pastoral prophets means we must, in our sermons, not only give our hearers room to grow in the direction we hope, but also room to disagree with us, even when we think such disagreement is rooted in selfishness, bigotry, or hatred. In a postmodern world, if we preach a progressive ethic with the sense that “God said, I believe it, and that settles it for me, hearers” we most want to convert will reject anything we have to say.⁴⁸

Allen’s response is one that embraces a homiletical liberalism related to philosophical liberalism emphasizing individualism, free speech, and freedom of religion – at least for some. He emphasizes the need to love persons no matter what they believe, and that love promotes a certain degree of tolerance toward their beliefs. Allen also warns against speaking too authoritatively about politics in the age of Trump, which reveals his position of social privilege. He writes:

Our sermons need to invite conversation about difficult topics instead of trying to put the punctuation on the end of those conversations. We need to open up congregational space for honest conversation in the place of divisive debate in which someone wins and someone loses. Conversation as a postmodern form of communication, values diversity and reciprocity without saying, “Anything goes.” A pastor who desires to hear what a congregant who disagrees with him has to say in order to appreciate the person and where she is coming from will be able to speak to and be heard by that person in ways a nonpastoral prophet never will.⁴⁹

While I appreciate the difficult realities addressed by Allen’s perspective, it reveals a high degree of social privilege. The notion that political compromise or political conversations that do not end with clarity about justice and injustice can be situations in which no one “loses” is unrealistic, even dangerous. Political compromise, agreements to disagree, and political inaction among the socially privileged have consistently harmed LGBTQ persons, immigrants, black and brown persons, and the poor, and in the context of fascism and proto-fascism in the USA, this risk is further heightened.

Allen’s engagement with preaching in the Trump era is just one example of how preaching and preachers have struggled with determining how to engage with fascism and proto-fascism. In “Protests from the Pulpit: The Confessing Church and the Sermons of World War II,” William Skiles suggests that Christian preaching in Nazi Germany was not nearly as oppositional as we might hope. Skiles analyzed over two hundred and fifty sermons, and found that only twelve percent were explicitly critical of or opposed to the Nazi state.⁵⁰ He observes that none of the

⁴⁸ *Wesley Allen*, *Preaching in the Age of Trump*, St. Louis 2017, 27.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *William S. Skiles*, *Protests from the Pulpit: Confessing Church and the Sermons of World War II*. *Sermon Studies* 1.1 (2017), 1–23; cf. <http://mids.marshall.edu/sermonstudies/vol1/iss1/1>

sermons he reviewed offered “a sustained attack on the Nazi state, National Socialism, or the regime’s policies;” “calls for Germans to sabotage or otherwise fight against the police state;” or “call[s] for organized and united action against the state.”⁵¹ The picture Skiles paints of preaching in Nazi Germany is that of preachers living in a totalitarian, fascist regime who were primarily focused on maintaining their independence from the Nazi state rather than organizing resistance to that state.

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⁵¹ Ibid., 21f.