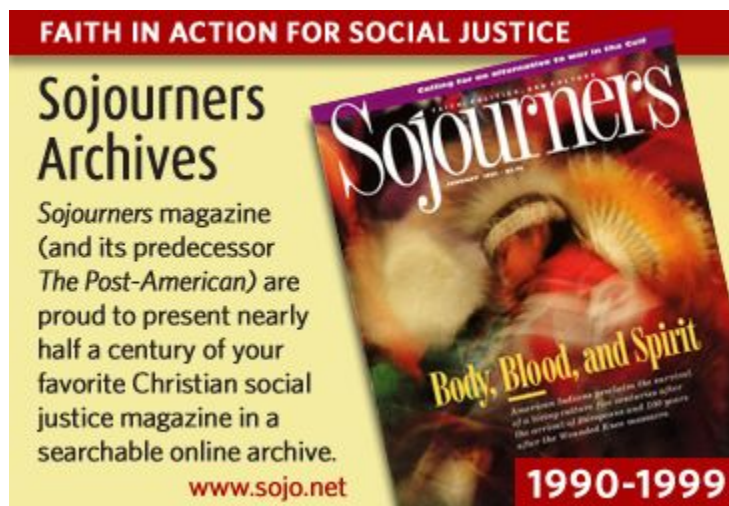


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## The Idol of White Supremacy

By Eugene F. Rivers III <sup>[1]</sup> March-April 1997 <sup>[2]</sup>

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*Rivers addressed the 1996 conference "The Legacy of William Stringfellow" at the Washington and Lee University School of Law in Lexington, Virginia, adapting Stringfellow's framework of powers and principalities to look at the current racial climate in the United States. In his remarks, from which this article is adapted, Rivers argues that the demonic ideology of white supremacy is the dominant principle governing American culture. And he challenges "white people"—a category he believes to be false at its core—to make a choice...between their God and their whiteness. —The Editors*

I met William Stringfellow in 1973, at Princeton Theological Seminary at a conference discussing the integration of biblical faith and a new political vision. Then a refugee from a mainline black pentecostal church in North Philadelphia, I jumped at the opportunity to attend. Stringfellow said something there that has stuck with me for the last 25 years, and has been confirmed in my own practical work: Speaking in tongues is a political act of resistance.

At the time, pentecostalism was viewed by the sophisticated, upper-middle-class, elite activists as a religious expression of people who dragged their knuckles on the ground.

But beneath the surface, and beyond the eyes of these sophisticates, God was doing something among the pentecostal poor.

Bill Stringfellow moved in politically progressive, Left, religious circles—not the stomping ground of the pentecostals. But he was able to discern that something was happening. Without necessarily speaking in tongues, Stringfellow was in a deep sense a pentecostal; he understood the importance of the demonic and the political dimensions of the charismata.

In 1964, Stringfellow wrote an article titled "Race as a Principality in the Church." He said, "To no principality, unless it be to those of commerce and finance, which are often allied and committed to racism, have the American churches been more notoriously and scandalously and complacently accommodating than to the principality of racism."

I want to expand this notion to include not simply racism—which today can mean virtually anything—but white supremacy, as *the* dominant principality of America. White identity splits the country in two and is now poised to generate civil war in the United States. This is also true, with minor historical variations, for Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking whites. Where did this construction come from, and how did it assume the force of an essential biological property?

And what is happening now? This politically and historically constructed

ideological concept is no longer delivering the goods to the workers who were fed it 200 years ago. Then, a person was Irish or Welsh or German or Scottish. But at some point in the process of political development, these people were sold a bill of goods that they were not simply Irish but *white*.

Irish culture, German culture, Scottish culture can be examined and discussed. But there is no white culture. This ideological construction was demonically inspired. It sold out poor whites who are Scottish, Irish, German.

From independence forward, these folks became politically incorporated into the white nation, which was theologically sanctified by Jonathan Edwards and others like him as America became the City on a Hill. This corner of hell for black and brown folk was "defined" as a City on the Hill, where God's providence is realized as defenseless women and children are murdered in the name of the white warrior God called Jesus. Today we see rebellion everywhere, because that white-identity ideology has collapsed on itself. The "crackers" are saying, "You all told me if I was a white man, there would be a chicken in every pot and a car in every garage. Well, there's no chicken and my car is broken. I'm mad and I'm ready to fight!"

These white boys voice a level of fury that's scary. But I empathize with them, because they've been lied to. They're not wrong. They might be doing illegal things, but they have a case.

And because they've been told, explicitly and implicitly, that they have one foot—their whiteness—in the camp of the elite, they continue to identify with the ideology of the powers. Even more insidious, others—people of color, who share a similar experience of the principality—become the object of their scorn.

A WHOLE NEW BODY of labor historiography provides an analysis of race that is incredibly radical. This critique clarifies the issues involved in and the interests behind the perpetuation of the ideology of white identity.

Comparative social policy analysts now say that it is precisely because of the racial character of the American experience that we are where we are. White-supremacist ideology retards, at every institutional level, the nation's ability to develop progressive social policies, even when they're more cost effective.

White racism, the concrete expression of the idol of white supremacy, is demonically entrenched. It generates an irrational allegiance to an idolatrous conception of the white race and prevents us from establishing rational policies and programs to alleviate suffering.

However, just by talking about white supremacy as a principality of America, we've grabbed the lion by the tail. We've spent 300 years developing this idolatry, and it is now deeply entrenched in the cultural psychology of the nation and the church. Only a radical conversion to biblical faith frees us from the burden of this demonic spirit that binds us and renders us unable to live as rational human beings.

A deep level of intercessory prayer will be required to confront the idolatry of white supremacy. It is violent and it can only be dealt with in the most discerning way. God gives the church the power to discern how to exorcise a demon, and this is a demon that generates a level of violence and irrationality that is causing this country to cave in on itself.

In terms of Stringfellow's tradition, what is suggested is that we, the people of God, must begin with a project of study, contemplation, and reflection, first, to discern the implication of this demonic spirit, and then to develop wise strategies for communicating to the larger public the source of our dilemma. Average white Americans are getting skewered by institutionalized, demonic forces that have given them an identity that is killing them. Some labor historians, in trying to figure out the last 15 years of disjunction between race and class, are claiming that the dichotomy is false: Class is mediated through the lens of race, they say. Only when we understand this can we comprehend the contradictions of the labor movement. Why is it that labor would be so motivated to do things that are antithetical to its own interest?

Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, in their book *Chain Reaction* (Norton, 1991), write that they used to apply a leftist class analysis, but now they conclude that every domestic policy issue is rooted in race: Welfare reform, abortion—all issues come down to race. There are also class issues, but they are mediated conti-

ually through the lens of white racism, as the identity of poor working-class whites collides against what are perceived to be the intrusions of the other.

Several recent books (see "As Long as You Think...", page 28)—Alexander Saxton's *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic*, David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness*, Theodore Allen's *The Invention of a White Race: Volume One* (all Verso publications), Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* (Routledge)—suggest that 200 years ago, a need arose for some ideological justification to offer the European tribes in order to get

them to move west and officially eliminate everybody else. An ideological construction for integrating the European groups was necessary once it was clear that the major obstacle to U.S. expansion was not Europeans. This construct also justified having the non-Europeans build the country.

Girded with what were then new scriptural interpretations identifying America with the New Israel (and often peoples of color as the antagonists to God's chosen), many poor immigrant church people found their Manifest Destiny in further migration westward, or in the comfort that, no matter how bad their situation, at least they weren't black. The name of God was invoked to justify white idols; the principalities and powers were given religious sanctification.

THE CHURCH IS THUS uniquely positioned to confront this situation. Secular liberals can't do it because they have no cogent ideology to offer in its place. The Right has a political agenda, and they recognize the importance of white supremacy ideology to make their agenda succeed. Those who use the label "religious progressive," or are part of the confessional community of the church, are the only safe space where there can be a dialogue that doesn't cause a race war. There is no other place.

Stringfellow, the Keeper of the Word, understood this. The new labor historiography that I have referred to simply documents and gives the additional details and footnotes for a very deep theological understanding of the principalities and powers. In a period of economic decline, fooling around with identities that are fragile—because people's life circumstances are fragile—requires a high level of discernment. If we are to move forward, white people must make a decision about where their spiritual allegiances are.

The church must be the place in which white supremacy is analyzed and deconstructed. For those of us who love the church, this is redemptive. The church has an opportunity to introduce an analysis that explains the apparent anomalies in American political culture: Why is everything breaking down? What is it about the American experience that makes it so completely crazy? How can a country with such a high level of industrial development have such ugly, aggressive social policies in contrast to Western Europe?

The church has been no less divided about white supremacist ideology than society. The blood of Christ was not heavy enough, not deep enough, to bridge the chasm as the ideology developed.

But now the church is in a unique position to be the church of Jesus Christ for the first time. Church people, especially white church people, are going to have to choose between being the church or being white. If you're going to be apostate, you are going to usher in apartheid America! It's going to be war. Blood's going to run in the streets for real.

Think about the irony. Sin has caught us now. The white militia is coming hard on one side, and Louis Farrakhan is on the other side. Both of these phenomena could be seen as poetic justice: White religiosity is getting what it deserves, an inevitable outcome.

Farrakhan has flipped that Christianity on its head. He's hoisting white Christians with their own petard. Although Farrakhan represents much that is repugnant, one cannot be too hard on him.

When Farrakhan speaks, he highlights the hypocrisy of the church. He says, "They say they got a church in the United States, but those white folks are just as racist as they can be. They're not thinking about God. If you took the total investment portfolio of all these white churches and see what percentage goes to the poor—I rest my case."

Farrakhan can credibly assert, "There is no Christianity in America. It's the old white tribal religion where the white warrior God and the white women and the white men are the same thing. Now, Gadhafi, give me half a million dollars, and I'll evangelize for you." Then he goes to Iran and says, "We can demonstrate the superiority of Islam by demonstrating a level of *koinonia* on the Islamic side that white racist Christians in America will never perform with their black brothers and sisters."

This creates a dangerous place, an idolatrous place. This white racist ideology is the most pernicious form of sin because it's based on pride.

God can deal with a thief, with a liar, with David and Bathsheba, but don't get arrogant, proud, and idolatrous. Pride is a sin that comes straight from hell itself. Pride is an ideology and a concept of identity that is against God in its essence. It is atheistic. It is demonic. And so the challenge now is, Will we be white or will we be the church?

THE AZUSA CHRISTIAN Community began as a student fellowship, formed at Harvard in the early 1980s, largely influenced by the tradition of William Stringfellow and his concept of the indivisibility of the political and the spiritual. His notion of Babylon as an appropriate political metaphor to explain the American experience was very powerful for us.

As young black Christian intellectuals and activists at Harvard and MIT, we believed we must put some flesh on the Word that we preach. So we elected to struggle with what class suicide, downward mobility, and living and working among the poor would mean for us.

Out of the crucible of this struggle, we have prayed to figure out a vision of new politics. The black secular professional elite, as a political group, has collapsed. The black community is in complete disarray.

To me, Farrakhan exists as a judgment against the sins of the black church. We in the black church have failed to do what God has called us to do and God let a false prophet, in my view, be lifted up to call us out, to embarrass us. So when a million brothers marched in Washington, D.C., 600,000 of them were black churchmen.

On the other side of the equation, God has used Farrakhan to chasten the white church. Farrakhan said, "The white church is an apostate institution. It's more committed to whiteness, to a white warrior God who was born in sin and has the innocent blood of the brown people and the slaves dripping from the hand, this very day." This is so indisputably obvious.

This country is split down the middle over the issue of the experience of slavery. We need to discern and exorcise the principality, the demonic spirit, that divides the church. Reading from the 10th chapter of the book of Daniel:

*I, Daniel, was the only one who saw the vision; the people with me did not see it, but such terror overwhelmed them that they fled and hid themselves. So I was left alone, gazing at this great vision; I had no strength left, my face turned deathly pale and I was helpless. Then I heard him speaking, and as I listened to him, I fell into a deep sleep, my face to the ground.*

*A hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees. He said, "Daniel, you who are highly esteemed, consider carefully the words I am about to speak to you, and stand up, for I have now been sent to you." And when he said this to me, I stood up trembling.*

*Then he continued, "Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me 21 days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia. Now I have come to explain to you what will happen to your people in the future, for the vision concerns a time yet to come. — Daniel 10:7-14*

At Azusa, we pray and wrestle with how to discern what the Spirit of God, what this *kairos* moment, is about. Reading in Daniel, it occurred to us: That's it! In America, the principality of white supremacy is blocking the prayers of the church! That ideology is the demonic prince that keeps Daniel's prayers from getting through. The prayers are being detained by this demonic thing that overshadows the entire national experience—white identity.

God is calling us to be the people of God. We're being called, as Stringfellow argued throughout his entire professional career, to turn our backs on the idols, to turn our backs on any concept of reality that would elevate the creature over the Creator. If we are to do justice to the theological, spiritual, and political tradition that William Stringfellow represents, we must pray—as he insisted we should—as a political act of resistance and transcendence that God will give us the courage to accept this challenge.

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