

EDITORIAL: DEFENDING WARD CHURCHILL

The flap surrounding the treatment of Ward Churchill, Professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder, should cause every academic to sit up straight and pay attention. In the wake of 9/11, Churchill, a longtime activist in Native American affairs and author of more than twenty books, wrote an essay entitled “On the Justice of Roosting Chickens,” that was subsequently developed into a book, wherein he describes the people in the Twin Towers as “little Eichmanns” (referring to the infamous Nazi war criminal), who were legitimately targeted by their attackers as participants in a larger system of domination and oppression that had greatly injured the rest of the world, including participation in the sanctions that led to the deaths of more than 500,000 Iraqi children in the aftermath of the first Gulf War. Although he has later disavowed blaming those whom he sees as innocents in the attack —“children, janitors, food service workers, firemen and random passers-by”— Churchill takes the perspective of the hijackers indicting people like the bond traders in the Twin Towers whom he understands as legitimate military targets. Using the same logic applied by the US military, which routinely destroys infrastructure that supports war efforts against the US, Churchill has described the financiers in the World Trade Center as “technicians” who helped smooth the efficiency of the American war machine. He has said that if the American public does not like those standards being applied to those who died in the Twin Towers then they should see to it that their government ceases to apply those same standards to civilian personnel in countries that are under attack by the US military, and that if they won’t they should expect that such attacks should continue against Americans.

This essay went largely unnoticed until recently, when Churchill was invited to Hamilton College in New York. Word of his essay broke into the mainstream press, and soon the feeding frenzy began. He was denounced by both Governors George Pataki of New York and Bill Owens of Colorado. Both Hamilton College and Wheaton College in Illinois rescinded their invitations. Television pundit Bill O’Reilly of Fox News Channel got into the act by urging his viewers to begin harassing everyone connected with Churchill in an attempt to silence him and cut him off from all means of financial support.

It is tempting to dismiss Churchill as a gadfly. Even he himself has recognized the intemperance and even cruelty of some of his remarks after the fact.

What happened at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and southeastern Pennsylvania was a body blow to every American and on that day all of us felt aggrieved. It is more than a little difficult to hear someone urging that we take responsibility for what others did to us. Moreover, one does not have to have had a course in pastoral care in order to cringe at the term “little Eichmanns” to describe the dead of 9/11, an epithet of the most vicious kind, used as a label for those who are the friends and loved ones of so many American families, and for whom the rest of America and even much of the world, mourned at a distance.

But Churchill’s case is of vital importance to scholars who take seriously the right to academic freedom because the capacity to offer an independent critique of the government and society is under increasing assault. We live in an environment in which journalism is being increasingly co-opted by interests that are eroding its independence. Mergers with large multinational conglomerates have turned news outlets such as CNN, ABC, CBS and NBC into bland, tame, shells of their former selves, as shareholders demand increased profitability and are less concerned about depth and breadth of coverage. Worse, the enormous pressure to “out-Fox” Rupert Murdoch’s Fox News, which is often little more than the propaganda machine of the Republican Party which has made it enormously popular among “red state” voters, has tilted an already neutered press dramatically toward the right in the nearly four years since 9/11 such that President Bush and his Republican colleagues are often given a free pass to make whatever outlandish and unsubstantiated claims (such as regarding the existence of WMDs in Iraq or the impending “crisis” of Social Security) with little probing or questioning, much less investigating. Furthermore, with the recent revelations that the Bush administration has been paying journalists under the table to promote the President’s agenda in what had previously been thought to be independent publications and broadcast programming, and the revelation that the White House had been giving preferential treatment to a right-wing journalist who was working under an assumed name for a website that was owned by leaders in the GOP and who regularly bailed out White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan with softball questions when the pressure in the daily briefings became too intense, have called the entire national press corps into question. In short, there is an increasing homogenization of the news that is to the great detriment of a public eager to hear the truth. It should be no surprise then, that in light of all of these developments in the field of journalism, academics who are critical of government policy would be the next target in this rising movement to control the flow of information and ideas, and Churchill looks like the prime candidate to be the first to suffer.

But scholars should sit up and take note of Churchill’s case not simply because it represents an attack on academic freedom, but also because it repre-

sents something important about the way that intellectuals can influence debate in the public sphere. Churchill's unvarnished critique of American life has put into play an important idea that many of us have thought but few of us have expressed in person or in print, which is that the key to America's dilemma in a post 9/11 world is not be found in revamping the intelligence community or in consolidating Homeland security or in taking down foreign powers that oppose us. Rather, the issue is one whose answer will only be found at the end of a larger national conversation about American values of production, consumption and expansion, all of which require a gigantic military presence that spans the globe and a cultural presence whose tentacles have long since left our shores and have now extended their reach to every corner of the planet. Many scholars, particularly ones who work in the area of political theology, are aware that such a conversation desperately needs to take place. What Churchill has done that most scholars have not is to speak in stark terms about what he recognizes as America's responsibility for its share of the world's and even its own problems, and he does so without the nuances, the caveats and the qualifications that typify much academic discourse. Churchill reminds those whose primary audience is the guild of scholars that there are times when the audience must be expanded, when this discourse must not simply be comment *about* the public sphere but rather *to* it.

The global situation demands such clarity of speech in the public sphere by the scholarly community just now. The American confrontation with Islam looms as an enormously important issue, as the US is clearly exploring the possibility of an attack on Iran, if not also on Syria. The Bush administration frames its confrontational stance in foreign policy matters by saying that it is addressing terrorism and rogue states, but the House of Islam and much of the world see it rather as a new American imperialism. Bush's framing of the issue works domestically, as evidenced by the November elections, but it is an abysmal failure in most of the rest of the world. And it is that gap between the way America looks at itself and the way that the rest of the world, particularly the House of Islam, looks at the US, which represents the gravest danger to American security and by extension the security of the world as well. Because we have yet to tend the weeds in our own garden, and are fixated on forcing others to pull the ones in theirs, we have not yet as a nation begun to grasp that 9/11 was, as some have referred to it, "blowback" from our policy decisions. Thus, not only have we continued making the same choices that created the circumstances in the world for 9/11 to occur in the first place, we have also fanned the flames by presenting ourselves to the world as a colonial power for the twenty-first century.

Therefore, what is needed are some truth-tellers, who will work to close the gap between America's self-perception and how the world perceives it. Americans are extremely pragmatic people and not prone to extended self-

reflection, so they will not sit long for universal critiques with no solutions. Telling Americans that they are all guilty for 9/11 or anything else for that matter, is actually a useless act, because a moment's reflection will tell them that whatever the cure for such universal guilt it would probably take more time and effort than they are willing to invest on such a project. It is much easier to restructure the CIA and expand the Defense budget, which is why those are the steps we have taken. So scholars will have to turn the sweeping indictments of American culture that they might have been tempted to write, into positive, concrete proposals for social change that will have to be directed, not to other scholars, but to the public in general. It is our hope that *Political Theology* will in coming days be a conduit for such fresh scholarly work.

Tim Simpson