

As good Americans, we “know” authoritarianism and religious extremism are other places’ problems. We’re taught so because we have a Constitution, Checks & Balances, and the freedom of expression to safeguard ourselves from tyranny and the dangers of religion prescribed by the government. We know about the Holocaust, for example, and the immense amount of suffering and death at the hands of the German government. We know who the targets were. Jews, of course, but also trans people, homosexuals, and the disabled, to name but a sliver of those targeted. The argument was that Jews needed purging to prevent them from overtaking the good, Christian world. The other “flawed” humans were aberrations, threats to the perfect society Hitler had in mind. Under the Soviet system, loyalty was prized over competence resulting in, among other things, bungled responses to tragedies like Chernobyl where experts were more concerned with their leader’s reputation than with addressing catastrophe. Under Chairman Mao, while women were said to be valued more than in capitalist countries, the overwhelming bulk of governmental leadership was held by men uninterested in the protection or inclusion of women in society beyond their usefulness as embodied talking points. Idi Amin ensured his halls of power were filled with people loyal to him over anything else. Papa Doc was so concerned with free speech that he had those who disagreed with him killed. Pinochet dropped dissenters out of helicopters. Carlos Humberto Romero fired into Salvadoran crowds protesting extreme repression, corruption, and wealth inequality. In all those situations, religious people faced manufactured dilemmas because people in power knew religion had the potential to sway the masses. To tap into that power, some authoritarians did away with religion altogether and replaced it with a kind of religion centered on themselves. Either way, religion was deployed as the “opiate of the people” in part because it could be so easily used to mollify or stir up political outrage as needed. Do we stand for what we’re told to believe or fight who we’re told to hate?

Alongside some nice and comforting things, there in John Jesus says, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” Some take that to mean if you wanna be Christian, you gotta follow Christ. But some construe that same verse very differently: connect a living person to a religion and claim the only way to God is through whatever religion that person embodies. Convert to that brand of Christianity, say, or face persecution, suffering, and ultimately death. The former is comforting and makes space for difference and compassion. The latter leads straight to the conclusion that non-converts aren’t worth the food they take from other people’s mouths. It’s a jump in reasoning, but for the sake of swaying the masses, reason isn’t all that important. They’ll happily use whatever tool works best in the moment backed by the entire weight of governance and military force. Authoritarians love to use religion because, whether they use it to support their actions or to create an enemy, they get what they want. We’re seeing this play out as the Still-Not-A-War-in-Iran-’Cause-We-Called-Timeout continues: a certain kind of Christianity taking on a reductive depiction of Islam.

America isn’t supposed to be authoritarian, and many of us grew to adulthood in a time when that could be believed with the limitations of certain societal blinders. It’s hard to accept that this is where we’ve gotten to. So with that in mind, I’ve pulled together a very incomplete list of ways Christianity’s being deployed, now. I ask you to consider how you’d respond if this was happening with a different religion in a different place. In an economy with very few jobs available, no guaranteed healthcare, and abysmal wages, Medicaid’s implemented a work requirement. If you aren’t working to the government’s satisfaction, you can’t get the assistance you need to survive. Social Security benefits are also getting cut for folks like that living with their parents. Because Jesus wants you to pull yourself up by your bootstraps (which he never said). 10-year olds are so afraid of defending themselves in immigration cases that they’re wetting themselves in the courtroom. A 12-year old

citizen said, understandably, “I was scared because it was my first time in court.” Because scripture says we can’t trust foreigners and children are fair targets (which it doesn’t). The Voting Rights Act is getting scrapped due to nonexistent fraud because we’re supposed to be honest in all our dealings (nevermind bearing false witness). We shouldn’t remember Jonathan Daniels or Martin Luther King Jr or the Freedom Riders who sacrificed their lives connecting our faith to the right to vote. The government said this is all okay (which it isn’t), and reminds us that rendering unto Caesar means staying in our religious lane (which it doesn’t). Saying the Iran War isn’t going well is akin to treason because our undying love of God must extend to love of Country (nevermind every prophet standing before an unjust king). Words lose their meanings (like Babel), fearful distractions spring up (like Barrabas or Mammon, take your pick), and the military is valorized to the level of being beyond reproach (nevermind that early Christianity wouldn’t even let soldiers become Christian). Inhumane conditions for prisoners and the reintroduction of antiquated methods of execution abound (see Hebrews & Matthew & Acts). Outcry from the international community complete with travel warnings, loss of status, broken treaties, and the Orwellian reorganization of allies painted as enemies like it’s always been this way (see a whole slew of Psalms).

All that’s authoritarianism justified with a cross, and all that’s why we gotta be careful not just with how we use scripture and symbols but with how we live out what our religion’s about. For many, the only exposure to Christianity they’ll ever get is Christians. Folks who don’t read the Bible or go to church or learn esoteric history only know what Christianity is from what they see and hear. And the most insistent voices now are professing something unrecognizable to anyone who truly practices our faith. With all that’s unfolding, one could be forgiven for thinking Christianity is authoritarianism. So it’s up to us and the millions of Christians like us who’re so used to living out our faith quietly to stand and speak up. We’ve been afraid of offending or alienating friends and neighbors, and I get that. Annoyance isn’t a great strategy for evangelism. But if we stay quiet, we forfeit the integrity of our faith to those who would use it for personal gain and discard it when they need it no longer.

Y’all might not’ve noticed this, but there’s a whole bunch of stones in those readings today, and y’all know I can’t resist a whole bunch of stones. A stone through a window is iconoclasm, but a stone stacked on another creates growth, strength, life, even safety. Our foundation remains with God as our strong rock, and we are the living stones God builds the Kingdom of Heaven with. Unlikely cornerstones in place of tragic rubble, we can even become stones tripping up evildoers! And it was by stones that Stephen was martyred, the first of many who stood against authoritarians across history for the good of our faith rather than the whims of this world. Do not forget the blood of the martyrs. We come out of a long line of martyrs bold enough to insist their religion was peaceful, merciful, and kind in the face of tyrants. I don’t know all their names, but I know their suffering handed down generation by self-sacrificing generation reaches us at a time when that great cloud of witnesses needs our witness, too.

I’m not telling y’all to go out and get martyred, but I am telling you to be objective about what people in power are doing, learn how faith gets twisted to justify tyranny, and stand boldly in the face of the tyrants who would use it. The generations that follow us need it. The blood of the martyrs calls for it. Scripture commands it. And God demands it. Stand boldly, people of St. Thomas’. Stand boldly.