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Theocracy Alert

The obsession of the religious right

By William Fisher

Online Journal Guest Writer

June 3, 2005—Try Googling: “James Dobson, Jerry Fallwell, Pat Robertson, and Religious Right.” Then click “search within results” for “Bush Administration, Human Rights, Civil Rights, Freedom of the Press, Independent Judiciary, Guantanamo Bay, Intelligence Reform, Prisoner Abuse, Poverty Reduction, Religious Tolerance, US Aid.”

You may be surprised by the results.

Out of millions of documents, you will find virtually none that refer to Guantanamo Bay, Prisoner Abuse, Poverty Reduction, Religious Tolerance, or Intelligence Reform.

On the other hand, you will find hundreds that refer to Bush Administration, Human Rights, Civil Rights, Freedom of the Press, and Independent Judiciary.

But these are almost exclusively devoted to the relationship of these issues to one over-arching subject: SEX.

Thus, the “human and civil rights” citations are about the evils of abortion, homosexuality, same-sex marriage, teen pregnancy, contraception, and kindred issues.

“Freedom of the Press” is reduced to attacking the ‘left-wing bias’ of journalists who disagree with the religious right—and lionizing those who agree.

The “independent judiciary” category is monopolized by *Roe v. Wade*, Terri Schiavo and other end-of-life issues, opposition to ‘activist’ judges who ‘legislate from the bench,’ Darwin vs. Creationism, and embryonic stem cell research, support for Bill Frist and Tom DeLay, and acclaim for President Bush’s court nominees.

US AID is dominated by scathing criticisms of the family planning, HIV prevention, and sex education programs America funds in poor countries.

And under “Bush Administration,” you will find unquestioning enthusiasm not only for the president’s positions on these issues but, implicitly and explicitly, for virtually every position and action Mr. Bush has ever taken.

So the issues most trumpeted by the so-called religious right are about how we got here, how we reproduce ourselves, how we should die, the kinds of intimate relationships we should and shouldn’t have, who should judge the appropriateness of those relationships—and how our Constitution should be protecting us against the ‘devil’ in our midst.

In other words, by an obsession with reproduction. SEX!

How the religious right got from Calvin to “The Crucible” to Condoms and Terri Schiavo requires a long journey through history. For theological scholars—indeed, for all of us—it is a fascinating and illuminating journey. But we’ll have to save that for another time.

For now, the more relevant questions are: Is this what faith is about? And, if not, where are those people of faith who express alternative views? And why aren’t we hearing their voices?

Well, you may not have noticed, but we are. These voices are not as deafening or as undoubting or as strident as Pat Robertson’s or Jerry Falwell’s or James Dobson’s. But they’re out there. And they’re struggling to be heard over the cacophony of the politically-savvy, exquisitely-organized, Bible-quoting machine of the extreme right wing of the God Squad.

There are many moderate voices among ‘people of faith.’ Perhaps best known is Rev. Jim Wallis, an evangelical Protestant who edits “Sojourners” magazine and is the best-selling author of “God’s Politics.”

Wallis says, “I’ve witnessed a new movement of moderate and progressive religious voices challenging the monologue of the Religious Right. An extremely narrow and aggressively partisan expression of right-wing Republican religion has controlled the debate on faith and politics in the public square for years. But that is no longer true . . . The monologue of the Religious Right is finally over, and a new dialogue has begun!”

There are, he says, “visible signs that the Religious Right does not speak for all Christians, even all evangelical Christians. What I hear, from one end of this country to the other, is how tired we are of ideological religion and how hungry we are for prophetic faith.”

Wallis is conservative theologically, yet believes his faith mandates support for progressive policies. “The Bible is full of poor people,” he said. “Biblical politics has the poor at the center.”

Wallis is not alone; many religious groups and conservative Christians oppose the Religious Right—both in politics and in their church hierarchies. For example:

The Interfaith Alliance “is a non-partisan, clergy-led organization dedicated to promoting the positive, healing role of faith in civic life and challenging intolerance and extremism.”

The Rev. Albert Pennybacker, a Lexington, Ky.-based pastor, is head of the Clergy Leadership Network, a cross-denominational group of liberal and moderate religious leaders seeking to counter the influence of the religious right and to mobilize voters to change leadership in Washington. Pennybacker says he is “tired of the conventional wisdom that equates religiosity with conservatism.” He says the religious right “often squeezes out the left in public debate.”

Sojourners for Peace and Justice is an evangelical progressive Christian commentary on faith, politics, and culture. Episcopal Bishop John Chane said at a recent Sojourners Call to Renewal chapel service: “We’ve gone from a war on poverty to a war on the poor.”

The Evangelical Environmental Network is a coalition of Christian groups promoting environmental protection.

A website by a former Catholic priest turned Methodist minister, “[Liberals Like Christ](#),” demonstrates a religious/political alternative to the Religious Right.

These are but a few of the so-called “freestyle evangelicals” who are averse to the right wing’s intolerance and lack of charity. Their concerns extend beyond the conservative morality issues of abortion and gay marriage to a broad range of issues—from social justice for the poor to America’s role in the world.

They are beginning to attract sizable audiences. And for at least some politicians, their message is beginning to resonate.

For example, Governor Bob Riley of Alabama proposed a tax increase to help the poor, calling this action his Biblical duty. On CBS News, Gov. Riley said, "we're supposed to love God, love each other, and help take care of our poor."

And former US Ambassador to the United Nations John C. Danforth, a former US senator and an Episcopal priest, says he does not fault religious conservatives for political action on high-profile issues like the Terri Schiavo case, but that the Republican Party has gone so far in adopting a sectarian agenda that it has become the political extension of a religious movement. He warns that, aside from obvious First Amendment issues, the work of government and political leaders is to hold together as one people in a very diverse nation in which religion can be uniting influence but is more often highly divisive.

Karl Rove notwithstanding, 'people of faith' like Jim Wallis and John Danforth may well be triggering a backlash against right-wing Christianity. Watch this space!

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