
Editorial

'Presidential Prayer' vs. Religion

As a projected attack on Iraq appeared more and more irrational, the warhawk faction had enveloped George W. Bush with a manic quality of crusading religion. One feature of this mental management of the President and his supporters is the "Presidential Prayer Team"—an Internet-centered network encouraging Americans to pray continuously for the President as he (is steered and) steers the nation off a cliff to war. Bush has apparently had substantial interaction with this operation, whose logo displays the words "United States of America" over a drawing of George Washington at prayer—though it says it is not government-affiliated. The PPT was launched immediately following the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks. From its beginning, Bill McCartney and other leaders of the Promise Keepers—a quasi-military psychological manipulation cult—have been pivotal. The PPT's executive director, John Lind, was a founding organizer of the Promise Keepers. When in Texas, the President attends the First United Methodist church, whose pastor, Rev. Don Eldon, is a war-promoter whom sources have reported is a Darbyite Armageddonist.

By contrast, the leaders of the United Methodist Church, to which the President belongs, are seeking to prevent the war, together with other mainstream churches in America and abroad. But within the United Methodists, there is a right-wing movement called the "Good News" caucus, based in Wilmore, Kentucky. Similar caucuses infest the Presbyterians and the Episcopalians. These rightist political-religious groups are linked together through the Institute for Religion and Democracy in Washington, funded by the Scaife and Olin Foundations. The Methodist "Good News" Caucus' president, Rev. Jim Heidinger, says Christians must back war on Iraq. Heidinger heavily promoted the work of Catholic "political theologian" Michael Novak, who was recently rebuffed by the Pope in an attempted pro-war trip to the Vatican.

A light was shone on this corruption of religion for imperial war, by a forceful op-ed published in the otherwise pro-war *Washington Post* on March 2, by the pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, Maryland near Washington. Rev. Fritz Ritsch slammed the

"Christianity" now around the President as "triumphalism," and particularly warned of the coded "end-times" constructs used by the President, for example, in his State of the Union speech. Ritsch noted that the President will not meet representatives of mainstream Christian denominations, while using the "bully pulpit" like a "theologian in chief."

Ritsch's column, titled, "Of God, and Man, in the Oval Office," gave a detailed and theological critique of Bush's rhetoric, and that of the so-called religious drive for war and empire. While Ritsch did not take up explicitly the role of Bush's lead speech-writer, Michael J. Gerson—the Elmer Gantry-type who wrote the President's Oct. 7, 2002, Cincinnati speech on Iraq—he did denounce specific words and phrases, which are the "secret-meaning" fundamentalist clap-trap Gerson specializes in.

"Contrary to popular opinion, the religion that this group espouses is Triumphalism, not Christianity," wrote Ritsch. "Theirs is a zealous form of nationalism, baptized with Christian language. The German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was martyred by the Nazis, foresaw the rise of a similar view in his country, which he labeled, 'joyous secularism.' . . . If, as I believe, this worldview is really American triumphalism, Christianity has taken a backseat to joyous secularism." The President "asserts a worldview that most Christian denominations reject outright as heresy: the myth of redemptive violence, which posits a war between good and evil . . . God [versus] Satan. . . . Christians have held this view to be heretical since at least the Third Century. . . . In contrast, the Judeo-Christian worldview is that of redemption. . . .

"The President used the words of a hymn 'There's Power in the Blood,' to strengthen the religious rhetoric of his State of the Union speech," said Ritsch. "He spoke of the 'power, wonder-working power' of 'the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people.' The original words of the hymn refer to the 'wonder-working power' of 'the precious blood of the lamb'—Jesus Christ. The unspoken but apparently deliberate parallel between Americans and Jesus is disturbing, to say the least."