

faith & freedom

REFORMING THE CHURCH'S SOCIAL & POLITICAL WITNESS

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Tête-à-tête with Tyrants

While Iranian President Ahmadinejad charms U.S. church leaders, Christians in Iran suffer persecution and Iran's neighbors worry about its growing nuclear program and threats of apocalyptic war.

ALSO: JESUS CHRIST: ILLEGAL IMMIGRANT?

CONFERENCE FOR UNITED METHODISTS ADVOCATES PACIFISM

MISREPRESENTING IRD

CHURCH LEADERS RESPOND TO 9/11 ANNIVERSARY



WITH FROM THE PRESIDENT, INTERNATIONAL BRIEFS, CHURCH NEWS, IRD DIARY & LETTERS

A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE INSTITUTE ON RELIGION & DEMOCRACY



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The IRD is a non-profit organization committed to reforming the Church's social and political witness and to building and strengthening democracy and religious liberty at home and abroad. IRD committees work for reform in the Episcopal Church, the United Methodist Church, and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The IRD also sponsors the Church Alliance for a New Sudan and the Liberty Initiative for North Korea.

Contributions to the work of the IRD are critically needed. Your gifts are tax deductible. Thank you for your support.

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LETTERS

OPPORTUNITIES

Erik Nelson's commentary, "Misrepresenting IRD" [see page 14] is excellent work. While being misunderstood and falsely accused is no fun, it does give you the opportunity (yet again) to clearly state the true mission of IRD, which Erik does nicely. Of course people are free to continue to disbelieve you, but you not responsible for that, you are only responsible to tell the truth. Keep telling it! And keep up the good work!

Jerry Rectenwald
via e-mail

ENVIRONMENT DEBATE

I was pleased to see that the latest issue of *Faith & Freedom* [Summer 2006] gave cover-story status to the discussion among evangelicals over environmental stewardship. It says something about the debate when fair coverage of both sides is cause for celebration. Thanks for modeling Christian dialogue by giving Richard Cizik a chance to respond in the same issue.

It's a pleasure watching an organization I hold dear tackle this topic. I have long considered the Institute an ally in reforming the Church by agitating for orthodoxy. May God continue to bless you and the staff in the coming year!

Quena González
via e-mail

HAVE YOU VISITED THE IRD WEBSITE RECENTLY?

The IRD website has all sorts of useful resources for you:

- Resources on issues such as the Middle East conflict, Christian-Muslim dialogue, ecumenism, and IRD's founding documents on Christianity and democracy.
- Back issues of IRD publications available for download.
- A collection of outrageous quotes from church leaders.
- Constantly updated news and analysis of the latest events and controversies within the U.S. churches.
- Online polls for you to express your opinion.

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The Purpose of the IRD: Renewing Democracy

by James W. Tonkovich



This is the third of a three-part series looking at the IRD's Purpose Statement:

The Institute on Religion and Democracy is

- an ecumenical alliance of U.S. Christians
- working to reform their churches' social witness, in accord with biblical and historic Christian teachings,
- thereby contributing to the renewal

of democratic society at home and abroad.

Most people, when they hear the word “democracy,” do not immediately think “religion.” In fact many might claim that to bring them into contact with one another is the great sin, a breach in the much vaunted “wall of separation” between church and state.

At the IRD, we believe that religion and democracy must go together and that it is our mission to restore of the role of religion in giving moral definition and direction to public life and policy.

As theologian and IRD board member Michael Novak has written, Alexis de Tocqueville observed in the 1830s that “the first political institution of American democracy is religion”—meaning, of course, Christian religion. This is because religion supplies society with truth and morality out of which flow community and identity.

Regarding truth, David Wells, professor of theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, notes that the great divide between pagans and the Old Testament prophets was that: “the pagans thought of truth in terms of private intuitions, and the prophets did not.” Prophets believe in objective, public, and authoritative truth rooted in history, “the history that God wrote and interpreted.” Wells goes on to say, “The same [pagan/prophet] divide today separates moderns, for whom truth is a matter of private insight, from biblical Christianity, for which it cannot be.”

If truth is only what my intuition says it is—if my truth is my truth and your truth is your truth—then democracy is reduced to a slug-fest where only might makes right. Weightier matters of justice, virtue, and the future lose their place in a national conversation where only power matters. As a result, democracy is debased and impoverished.

The Church in the pulpit and the public square must stand for truth. In the mainline denominations, truth has been relativized,

and in the evangelical world, as Wells correctly notes, “The seeds of full-blown liberalism have now been sown, and in the next generation they will surely come to maturity.”

Closely related to truth is morality. The discordant theme of the Old Testament book of Judges is “everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” Moral relativism reigned, and the social and political consequences were horrific.

Michael Novak, commenting on Tocqueville, writes,

When consciences are active, policemen needn't be numerous. Citizens are law-abiding willingly. Colonial Americans had already experienced periods of decline in religion, accompanied by a steady moral decline. They had also seen religious awakenings lead to tangible improvements in social peace. That was why they all believed that religion [in Tocqueville's words] “is necessary for the maintenance of republican institutions.”

The alternative to a public morality is millions of private moralities, most coexisting, but many in mortal conflicts with one another.

Relativized truth and personalized morality are marks of radical individualism, a worldview stated succinctly and with terrifying implications by Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*: “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”

Commenting on Kennedy's words, Michael Novak writes: “A more anarchic principle would be hard to identify. The Kennedy principle is the opposite to law. It throws every person into a region of lawlessness and personal arbitrariness. Its commandment is: do as you please.” And that is precisely what people are doing to the detriment of the rule of law and democratic society, for without virtuous citizens, democracy cannot long survive.

Sadly, in our churches—mainline, evangelical, Catholic, Orthodox, Pentecostal—truth, morality, identity, and the Church itself are seen as matters of personal preference, individual taste, and private choice. Even in the Church people do as they please—whatever is right in their own eyes. We are in need of reform.

A reformed Church will be a counter-cultural church standing for truth in the face of individual intuition and morality in the face of moral relativism. Only a counter-cultural church can perform its vital role of—as the IRD purpose statement has it—“contributing to the renewal of democratic society at home and abroad.” ✚

RELIGIOUS LEFT DEFENDS PARTIAL-BIRTH ABORTION

The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC) has filed a brief with the Supreme Court to defend the practice of partial-birth abortion in the name of “religious freedom.” Endorsers of the brief include three mainline seminary presidents, seven bishops of the Episcopal Church, the lobby office of the United Church of Christ (UCC), numerous Jewish groups, and liberal caucuses within the United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, and the Disciples of Christ.

The brief cites a position that the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) has had since 1973, generally opposing abortion while making exceptions for cases of rape, incest, or danger to “the health” of the mother. Therefore, the brief includes the NAE in its list of faith communities whose members would allegedly have their religious liberty violated by the partial-birth abortion ban. RCRC fails to mention that the NAE has taken a strong position in support of the legislation that the brief is opposing.

Various positions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) are selectively quoted to suggest a conflict with the partial-birth abortion ban. But that denomination’s position that “[w]e affirm that the lives of viable unborn babies...ought to be preserved and cared for and not aborted” is ignored. The brief also misrepresents earlier PCUSA policy statements that have been superceded, as if they were the denomination’s current position.

Elsewhere the brief concedes that the United Methodist Church officially opposes partial-birth abortions. But the brief faults the federal partial-birth abortion ban for failing to include the exception the United Methodist position has for cases of “severe fetal anomalies incompatible with life.” ✚

NCC LEADER PROMOTES “MIDDLE CHURCH” VALUES

This fall, the Rev. Dr. Bob Edgar energetically promoted his new manifesto, *Middle Church: Reclaiming the Moral Values of the Faithful Majority from the Religious Right*. Edgar, who will be stepping down as General Secretary of the National Council of Churches (NCC) at the end of 2007, used a

a book tour, a blog, and the NCC website to spread his message.

The principles Edgar promotes in his book to unify “people of faith in Middle Church, Middle Mosque and Middle Synagogue” focus on fighting such evils as tax cuts, the Iraq war, global warming, Christian Zionism, “President Bush’s callous administration,” and reductions in planned government social spending. The book also includes strong defenses of homosexuality and abortion. Religious conservatives are portrayed as worshipping “a God of violence and vengeance” in contrast



EJECTION FAILURE. The UCC ad campaign (which depicted this black woman and her child ejected from a predominantly white church) has, like other mainline church ad campaigns, failed to slow church membership decline.

to Edgar’s “God of hope and love.” In the book’s introduction, Edgar insists that he is not “exhorting people of faith to embrace any particular political agenda.”

In the last year, the United Methodist Church increased its funding of the NCC by ten percent. ✚

TELEVISION ADS FAIL TO REVIVE MAINLINE DENOMINATIONS

In recent years, two mainline denominations have attempted to reverse decades of steady decline with expensive television ad campaigns.

For the period 2001–2008, the United Methodist Church has committed over \$47 million to its “Igniting Ministry” campaign, which most prominently features television ads. Supporters have expressed great hope for the church growth that the campaign could provoke. But the denomination’s U.S. decline has actually quickened since “Igniting

Ministry” began. From 1996–2000, U.S. membership decreased by 1.8 percent while worship attendance actually increased by 1.2 percent. Between 2000–2004, U.S. membership decreased by 2.6 percent and attendance shrank by 2.5 percent.

In 2004, the United Church of Christ (UCC) similarly began a television campaign. Church officials have repeatedly boasted of how this “God Is Still Speaking” initiative resulted in skyrocketing traffic to denominational websites and numerous anecdotes of increased attendance. There was also free publicity from the refusal of a couple of networks to air the controversial ads disparaging other churches as unwelcoming. But the campaign’s failure to attract widespread grassroots support from congregations, whose giving to the national denomination is entirely voluntary, has resulted in its ad buys being dramatically scaled back, postponed, and discontinued prematurely. Meanwhile, the denomination’s membership decline has steepened since the start of the campaign, and over 200 congregations have opted to withdraw from the UCC in the last year. ✚

STUDY RELEASED ON BLACK CHURCHES AND FAITH-BASED INITIATIVES

A recent study by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a non-partisan African-American think tank, yielded several surprising findings about the Bush administration’s Faith-Based and Community Initiative (FBCI).

According to the survey of 750 black churches of various sizes, denominations, and regions, theologically and/or socially liberal churches were much more likely than their theologically conservative counterparts to express interest in or receive money through the program. Furthermore, FBCI grants were disproportionately disbursed in Democratic-leaning “blue” states while in the “swing states” of Florida and Ohio only one church in the sample had received an FBCI grant. Interestingly, the study concludes, “the churches with ministers who disapproved of the FBCI were more likely to apply for an FBCI grant than churches with ministers who approved of the FBCI.”

The study observes that such findings “cast at least some doubt on the view that the FBCI represents a political tool—at least insofar as black churches are concerned.” ✚

ANGLICAN ARCHBISHOP CAREY RESPONDS TO POPE'S CONTROVERSIAL COMMENTS ON ISLAM

The Most Rev. George Carey, the former Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, addressed the controversy concerning comments on Islam made by Pope Benedict XVI. Without endorsing the Pope's provocative quote from the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologus, the archbishop seconded the Pope's concerns about Islam and violence. He described the Pontiff's address as an "effective and lucid" examination of reason and religion.

Speaking at Newbold College in Berkshire, England, Carey quoted Harvard professor and author Samuel Huntington, saying, "The fundamental problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism—it is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture, and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power."

"We are living in dangerous, and potentially cataclysmic times," said Carey. "There will be no significant material and economic progress until the Muslim mind is allowed to challenge the status quo of Muslim conventions and even their most cherished shibboleths."

Carey expressed his belief that true Islam is peaceful, but emphasized the need for Muslims to examine the increasing amount of violence in the name of their religion. "The Muslim world must address this matter with great urgency," he said. ✚

THREE INDONESIAN CHRISTIANS EXECUTED

On September 22, 2006, three Indonesian Catholic men accused of masterminding a 2000 riot were executed by firing squad in Central Sulawesi. Indonesian authorities have claimed that the men admitted their role in the clash between Christian and Muslim inhabitants in the Poso region of Central Sulawesi, despite mounting evidence of their innocence.

Muslim and Christian witnesses have testified that the three men—Fabianus Tibo, Dominggus da Silva and Marinus Riwu—did not take part in the riots, but actually attempted to rescue children from an orphanage set on fire during the rampage. Many have claimed they were not allowed to testify during the trial.

Prior to the execution, over 4,000

Muslims rallied in Poso to demand the death of the three men, shutting down schools, businesses, and mass transportation. Protestors threatened further violence and destruction if the men were not executed as required by Muslim law.

Former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid joined various human rights organizations in calling for a stay of execution. "In *hadis* [Muslim tradition], if there is doubt, in this case if the prosecutor has any doubt, don't do it," he said. "It's just that the attorney general did not pay attention to religion." ✚

SALVATION ARMY RECOGNIZED IN MOSCOW

Following a five-year struggle, the European Court of Human Rights has ruled that the Russian government must allow the Salvation Army to register as a religious organization in Moscow. The decision overturns a previous ruling by a Moscow district court in 2000 upholding the government's decision to refuse registration. The original ruling categorized the Salvation Army as a "militarized organization," and suggested the group might seek to overthrow the government.

The European court unanimously ruled that the Russian state violated the church body's freedom of assembly and association as spelled out by the European Human Rights Convention. Russia must pay the Salvation Army in Moscow 10,000 Euros in compensation.

"[T]he right of believers to freedom of religion, which includes the right to manifest one's religion in community with others, encompasses the expectation that believers will be allowed to associate freely, without arbitrary state intervention," the court said in its ruling.

"The decision sends a strong message that religious freedom is an integral and important aspect of the European Charter of Human Rights," said Jay Sekulow, chief counsel of the American Center for Law and Justice. "The discriminatory action taken by the Russian government against



FREEDOM OF RELIGION? Muslim rioters burned St. Peter's Cathedral in Dutse, Nigeria, after a Christian woman was accused of making blasphemous comments about Islam.

the Salvation Army represented a serious and dangerous assault against religious freedom." ✚

BLASPHEMY CLAIM SPARKS RIOTS IN NIGERIA

Comments made by a Christian tailor in Nigeria to a Muslim client on September 18 resulted in charges of blasphemy against the woman, and the burning of 16 churches in the city of Dutse, according the Christian news service Compass Direct.

As a result of the riots on September 20, six Christians were injured, and over 2,000 were left homeless in the capital city of the Jigawa state. Christians compose less than 20 percent of the total population of Dutse, which is predominantly Muslim. Government officials have announced that Christians and Christian churches will be required to relocate outside the city.

The Rt. Rev. Yusuf Ibrahim Lumu, the Anglican Bishop of Dutse, claimed that local authorities were unwilling to quell the riots. "In a country that talks about freedom of religion, churches were destroyed by Muslim fanatics with active connivance of the police commissioner of Jigawa state and Muslim leaders," charged Lumu.

Some Christians have expressed the belief that a provocative radio commentary from the Jigawa state director of religious affairs prior to the attacks exacerbated tensions between Muslims and Christians in the region, precipitating the attacks. In the address, Sheikh Yusha'u Abubakar mocked the concept of the Trinity and told Muslims to prepare "to fight the Nigerian Jews [*i.e.*, Christians]." ✚

"Come into My Parlor," Said the Spider to the Fly

by James D. Berkley and Alan Wisdom

On September 20, some 45 U.S. religious representatives held a 70-minute conversation with the controversial President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This fiery leader, known for his rambling letter attempting to convert President Bush, his nuclear-weapons posturing, his inexplicable denial of the Holocaust, and his hateful rhetoric about annihilating Israel, took time to charm religious leaders while he was in New York to address the United Nations. He even invited them to visit Tehran, and they might go.

The September 20 meeting was arranged by the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), at the invitation of the Iranian government. According to the MCC, it "was the first face-to-face meeting between the Iranian leader and leaders from mainline Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, evangelical and historic peace churches." We have seen three quite different accounts of the meeting: from the MCC, from the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), and from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Our evaluation of the meeting depends very much upon which account most accurately conveys the spirit of the conversation between President Ahmadinejad and the U.S. church leaders. Was it a mutual admiration society, or was it a frank exchange of widely divergent views?

As Christians called to be peacemakers, the church leaders were certainly commendable in their desire to seek reconciliation with Iran. U.S. and European diplomats have been doing the same thing, too, in long and so far fruitless attempts to induce Ahmadinejad's Islamist government to give up its threatening ways.

Most diplomats know, however, the dangers of a public meeting with an aggressive despot. It is liable to turn into a public-relations exercise benefiting only the despot. He gains a prestigious platform to voice his grievances and demands. Audience members—if they are polite and non-confrontational and smile for the camera—may appear to endorse the despot's position. In any case, their respectful attention lends him credibility that he might otherwise have lacked.

U.S. mainline Protestant leaders have a long history of being manipulated, in just this manner, by anti-American dictators such as Fidel Castro, Kim Il Sung, and Saddam Hussein. Perhaps it was this history that encouraged the Iranian government to seek the September 20 meeting.

Naturally, we wondered whether the 45 leaders meeting Ahmadinejad would repeat past mistakes. Or would they take a different approach, confronting him with hard questions about Iran's actions and holding him accountable for his responses? The answer

to these questions depends upon which account of the September 20 meeting one reads.

QUAKERS GUSH

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) posted a report that was as cheery as it was vacuous. "This is a beginning for open dialogue," exulted AFSC General Secretary Ellen McNish. "The president [Ahmadinejad] was glad to meet." McNish added, "President Ahmadinejad welcomed a future opportunity for continuing dialogue with faith leaders that would focus on a religious basis for peace and justice."

The AFSC article conveyed no sense that the Iranian president might also believe in a religious basis for war against Israel and other infidel nations. It did not even hint at any disagreements between Ahmadinejad and his U.S. church audience. Questions from the audience focused on "how religious communities can cooperate in a time of tension," according to the AFSC.

The Quaker organization described the meeting as a discussion of Iran's "current political crisis with the United States and the role religious communities can play to resolve it." This characterization ignored the fact that

condemnation of Iran's nuclear program has come not just from the United States, but also from the entire international community via the United Nations Security Council. It also inadvertently revealed the asymmetry in the U.S. church leaders' approach to the crisis. Since these leaders could exert precisely zero influence on Iran, the obvious implication was that they were there to learn how to alter the American stance.

McNish closed with a gush of praise for Ahmadinejad: "I was encouraged by the president's spirituality. Expounding from his own faith tradition, he spoke of Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad as prophets and spiritual guides." McNish did not indicate whether her own "faith tradition" might object to demoting Jesus from King of Kings to just another "spiritual guide." Nor did she raise the possibility that some spiritualities might be evil and destructive spiritualities. It is doubtful whether the AFSC official would have offered similar praise for the spirituality of George W. Bush.

MENNONITES VAGUELY UNEASY

The MCC told a markedly different story about the September 20 meeting. It acknowledged deep and dangerous disagreements between Iran and the U.S. religious communities. "That is why we are here," the MCC quoted its executive director, Robb Davis, as

Was it a mutual admiration society, or was it a frank exchange of widely divergent views?



VAGUELY UNEASY. Robb Davis, Executive Director of the Mennonite Central Committee (left), chats with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (right) in New York City.

saying in a prepared statement welcoming Ahmadinejad, “to talk, to raise difficult questions and to begin to build relationships that will lead to honest and open exchange to confront the very real divisions that tragically lead to animosity, hatred and the shedding of blood.”

But the MCC article was less than specific about the nature of these “very real divisions.” Delicately and non-judgmentally, it referred to “a mixture of religious and political issues such as the harsh language between the U.S. and Iranian governments, Ahmadinejad’s publicly stated position on the Holocaust and the role of religious groups in the nuclear weapons dispute.” The MCC never said exactly what was “Ahmadinejad’s publicly stated position on the Holocaust,” nor did it give any further details on “the nuclear weapons dispute.”

The Mennonite body reported Ahmadinejad’s statements in a neutral tone, with little evaluation of their credibility. Readers might suppose, at a minimum, that the MCC takes these statements seriously.

For example, regarding the Holocaust, the MCC reported that “Ahmadinejad referred to previous statements in which he raised questions about the Holocaust and said there is need for additional historical research to be done about it.” The Iranian president also “asked why so much attention was being paid to those who died in the Holocaust.” Davis gave the weakest of replies to this outrageous nonsense. According to the MCC article, he “told Ahmadinejad that more dialogue was necessary on this issue

[of the Holocaust].”

The article added, however, “In a discussion among the delegation members following the meeting some of the participants said Ahmadinejad’s responses on the Holocaust were less than satisfying.” This phrase suggested that perhaps other participants *were* satisfied with the Iranian leader’s statements minimizing the Holocaust.

Regarding the Iranian nuclear program, the MCC reported simply that “Ahmadinejad said Iran is not producing weapons and has no need to.” He also “suggested faith groups should join with scientists to visit nuclear facilities around the world to make certain countries are adhering to nuclear agreements.”

The MCC expressed neither doubt nor confidence about Ahmadinejad’s denial of nuclear weapons ambitions. Davis commented only that “the president broke very little new ground in his responses.” On the other hand, Davis seemed warm to the laughable notion that priests, ministers, rabbis, and imams should go around inspecting nuclear facilities.

PRESBYTERIANS MAKE A POINT

The account in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) News Service (PNS) was focused on what was said by PCUSA representatives in the September 20 meeting. If it is accurate, those Presbyterian representatives were much more confrontational than their Quaker and Mennonite colleagues. President Ahmadinejad got an earful from at least part of his audience.

According to Linda Valentine, new Executive Director of the PCUSA General Assembly Council, Presbyterian participation in the meeting was carefully conceived. The denomination’s representatives apparently went into the meeting with an agenda. Joel Hanisek, the PCUSA representative to the United Nations, remarked to PNS: “We did not want to miss this opportunity to give witness to the Presbyterian Church’s support of Israel and to reject the false and disturbing rhetoric of Holocaust denial used in the past by President Ahmadinejad.”

There were two important things missing from the PNS report on the September 20 meeting. The first was any account of remarks by non-PCUSA participants in the meeting. We understand that there were Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and evangelicals present in the room with Ahmadinejad. We assume that United Methodists, Episcopalians, Evangelical Lutherans, and other mainliners might also have been represented.

What did these other church leaders say? Were they unctuous like the Quakers or assertive like the Presbyterians? We await further accounts from other sources.

The second thing missing from the PNS report was any sense of how the Iranian president responded to the challenges from PCUSA participants. The report simply stated, “Ahmadinejad disagreed with some of it.” Then it added an upbeat quote from Lisherness: “He seemed open to hearing what we had to say. At the end of the conversation he said that he was willing to continue to talk about matters of faith with religious leaders.”

This abrupt ending of the PNS article is rather disconcerting. It suggests that, after registering their objections with Ahmadinejad, the Presbyterian participants (or the PNS reporter) were content to drop the subject. They apparently felt no need to discern whether the Iranian president’s responses were constructive or promising. Instead they promoted the (probably mistaken) impression that some progress towards peace had been made merely because the Iranian president “seemed open to hearing what we had to say.” ✚

Iran: Generations of Persecution, Generations of Faithfulness

by Faith McDonnell

Long before the rest of the world had insomnia over a “nuclear Iran,” Christians in the Islamic Republic had lost more than sleep. For decades, Iranian Christians have lost their human rights, their freedom, and sometimes their very lives.

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has been a dangerous place for generations of Christians. In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, persecution was directed at the Anglican Church. In the 1990s the Islamic regime targeted top evangelical Christian leaders. And still today Iranian Christians are discriminated against, arrested, and even killed. But the Iranian church continues to grow. Generations of faithful followers of Christ have emerged through decades of persecution.

Fereshteh Dibaj is among these faithful ones—a second-generation Iranian Christian suffering persecution for the sake of Christ. Fereshteh and her husband, Amir (Reza) Montazami, are leaders of an independent house church in Mashad, northern Iran. In the early hours of September 26, 2006—less than week after Iranian President Ahmadinejad spoke to the United Nations and met with U.S. church leaders in New York (see p. 6)—these two unheralded Iranian Christians were arrested at their apartment. They were then taken to a police station belonging to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.

Montazami had converted to Christianity some 15 years ago, when he was in his early 20s. His wife, Fereshteh, 28, is the youngest daughter of the Rev. Mehdi Dibaj, an Assemblies of God minister who was martyred in 1994 (see below). She was six years old when her father was first arrested. He was murdered on his way to celebrate her sixteenth birthday.

When Amir and Fereshteh were taken away for interrogation this past September, they had to leave behind their own six-year-old daughter, Christine, in the care of Amir’s parents. Iranian Christians, and then people all over the world, prayed for the jailed couple. On October 5, 2006, Amir and Fereshteh were released on bail. But their travails, and those of other Iranian Christians, are a long and continuing story.

In the 1970s, while some Western Anglicans were trading evangelism for religious pluralism, Anglicans in Iran were introducing Muslims to “Issa,” Jesus. For this the Iranian Anglicans paid a high price. Arastoo Sayyah, an Anglican priest and Muslim convert from Shiraz, southwest Iran, had his throat cut on February 19, 1979. In October 1979, Anglican bishop Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, also a

Muslim convert, survived an assassination attempt. But in May 1980, Dehqani-Tafti’s son, Bahram, 24, was shot to death on the street in Tehran. Anglican Church property was confiscated and both Persian and British clergy were arrested and imprisoned.

The Islamic regime attempted to destroy the church, but persecution produced the opposite effect. Before the Islamic Revolution there were only 200–300 converts from Islam. By 1992, after more than a decade of brutal repression, Iranian Christians International (ICI) reported that there were 13,300 Iranian converts from Islam around the world. Some 6,700 of these were living in Iran.

Throughout the 1990s some of the top Iranian evangelical leaders were murdered by a death squad that is now believed to have operated at the behest of the government. Islamic law (*shari’a*) was also used to eliminate influential Christians. In December 1990, Hossein Soodmand was sentenced to death for apostasy in a *shari’a* court in Mashad. Soodmand, an evangelist and Assemblies of God minister, had converted from Islam in 1964. The 55-year-old pastor was hanged on December 3, 1990, in Mashad, which in Farsi means “place of martyrdom.” He left behind a wife, who was blind, as well as four children.

In late 1993 another Muslim convert, Mehdi Dibaj, was sentenced to die for his apostasy. Dibaj had been imprisoned for more than nine years, during which time he was beaten, subjected to mock executions, and held in solitary confinement for two years. His wife had been forced to divorce him and marry a Muslim.

Dibaj’s testimony before the Court of Justice in Sari, northern Iran, on December 3, 1993, still encourages the faithful today. He told the court:

They say, “You were a Muslim and you have become a Christian.” This is not so. For many years I had no religion. After searching and studying, I accepted God’s call and believed in the Lord Jesus Christ in order to receive eternal life. People choose their religion but a Christian is chosen by Christ. He says, “You have not chosen me but I have chosen you.”

The General Superintendent of the Assemblies of God in Iran, Bishop Haik Hovsepian Mehr, sent abroad word of Dibaj’s impending execution. Bishop Haik, as he was fondly called, would not keep silent about the plight of Iranian Christians. “If we go to jail or die



INTERROGATED. When Amir and Fereshteh Dibaj were taken away for interrogation this past September, they had to leave behind their own six-year-old daughter, Christine, in the care of Amir's parents. On October 5, 2006, Amir and Fereshteh were released on bail. But their travails, and those of other Iranian Christians, are a long and continuing story.

That evening the authorities called Yusefi's family to say that they had "found" his body hanging from a tree near his home. They called his death suicide, but could not explain why

for our faith, we want the whole Christian world to know what is happening to their brothers and sisters," he said.

An international campaign to free Dibaj sprang up from Bishop Haik's efforts. Thanks to pressure from organizations worldwide including IRD, Dibaj was released on January 16, 1994. But just three days later Bishop Haik disappeared from a street in Tehran. On Sunday, January 30, IRD was helping lead a prayer vigil for him when the terrible news came: The Iranian authorities announced that they had "found" Bishop Haik's body eleven days before.

More blows came later that same year. On June 24, Mehdi Dibaj disappeared on his way to Fereshteh's birthday party. Then Tateos Mikaelian, senior pastor of St. John Armenian Evangelical Church (Presbyterian Church of Iran), disappeared on June 29. Mikaelian had taken over as president of the Council of Evangelical Ministers when Bishop Haik was murdered.

On July 2, 1994, authorities called Mikaelian's son to say that they had "found" his body in a freezer. The cause of death was said to be gunshots to the head. It was later discovered that he was lured from his house by a woman pretending an interest in converting.

Three days later, the police informed Mehdi Dibaj's family that they had "found" his body buried in a park in Tehran. He had been stabbed in the heart, but also had rope burns on his neck.

Another leader, Mohammad Bagher Yusefi, 34, an evangelist and Assemblies of God pastor in the northwestern province of Mazandaran, was murdered on September 28, 1996. Yusefi left his house in Sari at 6:00 that morning for prayer, but never returned.

he also had a broken leg.

Elam Ministries, an outreach to Iranians, said, "Pastor Yusefi was known as 'Ravanbaksh,' which in Persian means 'Soul Giver,' because of his sacrificial commitment to evangelism and discipling new believers." Yusefi and his wife, Akhtar, had been caring for Mehdi Dibaj's two young sons as well as Pastor Soodmand's widow and her two fatherless children.

It was difficult enough for the church to lose its leaders, but many Iranian Christian families also lost their sole support, a beloved husband and father. And yet the widows and orphans of Iran's martyred church leaders have remained faithful.

Most recently the widow was Afoul Achikeh, wife of Turkman Muslim convert Ghorbandordi (Ghorban) Tourani, an evangelist and house church pastor in Gonbad-e-Kavous, in northwest Iran. On November 22, 2005, Ghorban was the victim of a deception similar to that used on Mikaelian. Someone "interested in becoming a Christian" called him. Ghorban went to meet the person in secret, but no one appeared. As he came home, he was attacked by three men waiting for him in a car. He was stabbed and his bleeding body was left in front of his house.

Voice of the Martyrs ministry reports that when Achikeh saw her dead husband's body she declared loudly, "O people, remember that Ghorban is a Christian martyr who laid down his life for the sake of Christ."

"I now have realized how real Jesus and the Christian life was for Ghorban," she said, "that he was willing to give his life for His sake." Her own commitment has grown, and she and her children have withstood pressure by Ghorban's brothers

to return to Islam.

Fereshteh Dibaj, too, could have taken a different course. After seeing her father imprisoned, then released, and then abducted and cruelly murdered, she could have written off faith in a God who would allow such injustice. She could have kept apart from the church. She could have conformed to the dominant Islam. Or she could have tried to escape from Iran.

But Fereshteh has done no such thing. Instead she remained in Iran and remained in the church. She took the additional risk of marrying Amir, a convert from Islam like her father. And, with Amir, she took leadership in the church in Mashad.

The testimony of such brave leaders is essential in the continued growth of the Iranian church. More Muslims have been coming to Christ, reporting dreams and visions of Jesus. But the same regime that threatens its neighbors also threatens its own Christian minority.

Iranian President Ahmadinejad apparently sees himself as a sort of "John the Baptist" of Islam. He believes he is to lead a jihad preparing the way for the Mahdi, the Muslim ruler who will establish the worldwide caliphate. Meanwhile, Christians in Iran are agents of a different kind of transformation, propelled by love rather than nuclear weapons.



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Jesus Christ: Illegal Immigrant?

by Mark Tooley

Immigration is a complicated issue, where all sorts of Christian moral concerns make legitimate claims upon our sympathies. We are called to be just and kind to the stranger. But we are also called to uphold the law. It is proper for nations to guard their borders and to distinguish legally between citizens and non-citizens, law-abiders and law-breakers. Refugees fleeing for their lives have a right to asylum. If possible, families should be preserved rather than rent asunder. It is not easy to reconcile and serve justly all these competing moral claims.

But to the prophets of the religious left, it's all very simple: The Bible commands open borders, we believe the Bible, and that settles the issue. Indeed, according to one theologian, Jesus and the Holy Family were among the most preeminent of illegal immigrants!

Writing for the recently unveiled Democratic Party website for liberal Christians, FaithfulDemocrats.com, Shaun Casey of United Methodist Wesley Seminary in Washington, D.C., insists: "Jesus was an illegal alien and that ought to shape how we enter the current debate." Casey is on the advisory council for this new Democratic website.

Casey recounts his encounter with an obstinate student in his Sunday school class who, in defiance of Casey's teaching about "the multitude of passages calling for God's people to love aliens," was adamant that undocumented workers should return home, in accordance with U.S. law. "No biblical argument to the contrary would move this person off this thesis," Casey laments.

"It struck me as very ironic that this class member would affirm the orthodox Christian belief of Jesus as the Son of God, yet the logic of the political credo would have demanded that Joseph, as a law breaker, should have surrendered Jesus to Herod for execution as an infant," Casey observes with regret. "No cross, no teaching, no ministry, just infanticide should have been Jesus' fate on earth."

Casey claims that when Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt to protect the Baby Jesus from a wrathful King Herod, they were illegal immigrants and somehow role models for today's surreptitious border crossers. "They, too, fled to Egypt, suffered persecution, were redeemed by God, and then were empowered to live lives in solidarity with sojourners and aliens wherever they encountered them,"

Casey concludes, as though the political point is obvious. "Likewise disciples of Jesus throughout history pick up the same ministry of solidarity with displaced people."

"But too often political ideology clouds good theology," Casey laments. "In the current debate over immigration policy it distresses me to no end that so many of my fellow church goers ignore this fundamental tenet that should be central to our identity." The Christian ethicist bemoans that today's "theological amnesiacs" are insisting on "secular law and order ideology over a biblical mandate."

In other words, according to Casey, today's advocates of immigration law enforcement are morally infanticidal, metaphorically consenting to the dismemberment of Baby Jesus. The open borders lobby is following a supposedly clear "biblical mandate."

If Casey's facile examination of immigration is what passes for high theological analysis on FaithfulDemocrats.com, then the Democratic Party's website may only be successful among Christians who do not own or at least do not read a Bible. Joseph, Mary, and

their infant Son were refugees fleeing for their lives, not illegal immigrants searching for higher wages. The Scriptures do not speak of any Egyptian laws they violated by their flight to Egypt. Of course, unlike

most of today's illegal immigrants to whom Casey is straining to compare the Holy Family, Joseph and Mary took their Child back to Nazareth after King Herod died. Their "sojourn" in Egypt was always intended to be a brief one. So far as we know, Joseph and Mary did not demand any special privileges from Egypt or claim to be persecuted by Egyptians.

In fact, from what we know, Joseph and Mary were fairly law abiding, their compliance with the Roman census in the Nativity story being one example. Jesus, as an adult, taught "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's" and was never the political revolutionary that many of His contemporaries wanted Him to be, or that many of today's liberation theologians imagine Him to be.

As Casey and other opponents of immigration law like to point out, the Scriptures are full of reminders that the Jews had once been aliens in Egypt. But these modern polemicists rarely mention that the ancient Jews were invited into Egypt by the Pharaoh and Joseph. They

Casey claims that when Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt to protect the Baby Jesus from a wrathful King Herod, they were illegal immigrants and somehow role models for today's debates about immigration.



ILLEGAL IMMIGRANT OR REFUGEE? Some on the religious left would rewrite the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt (depicted here in a woodcut by Julius Schnoor von Carolsfeld) as an example of illegal immigration. But the story is better seen as an example of refugees fleeing from the threats of an evil tyrant, in this case Herod.

were not there illegally, nor did they claim any special privileges. When the Egyptian hospitality ran out and the Jews were turned into slaves, Moses led the Hebrews back to their promised homeland.

Much of the Scriptures are about the Jews trying to get back home from their various exiles, not about their trying to emigrate elsewhere, legally or otherwise. This point is lost upon many modern religious advocates of unrestricted immigration, many of whom shun all national borders and nation states, the United States in particular. For some of these theologians and religious activists, the United States is not a nation worthy of protection but merely a smorgasbord of special benefits that justice requires must be offered to all.

In this vein, *Christian Century* magazine editor Jason Byassee writes about Elvira Arellano, the illegal Mexican immigrant activist who is holed up in a Chicago Methodist church, convening press conferences and refusing to return home in compliance with U.S. law. In a column for religious left leader Jim Wallis' Sojourners website, Byassee admits that "occasionally it's the liberals who are the literalists" about the Bible.

Arellano, who has entered the United States twice illegally, initially found favor among Chicago politicians, who

sympathized with her young son, who was born in the United States and who had health problems. The son's health has since improved, and Arellano's cause has become less politically popular. But her United Methodist pastor is a prominent community activist, and the pastor's wife heads an immigrant advocacy group.

"With Coleman and Arellano's political histories and leanings, it is tempting to see this standoff between the little storefront church and the Department of Homeland Security as so much politico-religious theater cooked up for the cameras," Byassee observes realistically. "Why is Arellano so special that she gets national news coverage, while millions of people in similar plights are ignored?" He admits she faces no danger in Mexico, and the comparisons of her to Rosa Parks are "self-flattering at best."

But Byassee insists there is "one problem" with deporting Arellano: the Bible. The Book of Exodus warns against oppressing a "resident alien." And the letter to the Hebrews insists on "hospitality to strangers." According to Byassee, Arellano's church is "doing that which other American Christians now find so difficult: minding the letter of the scripture to care for the stranger, as others around her froth for her banishment."

Supposedly in Arellano's case, leftists are "attending strenuously to the letter" of the Bible, while conservatives "are blithely and arrogantly ignoring" the Good Book. "Now, the government and the political right have turned their voracious eyes on one little woman in a storefront church," Byassee opines with sadness.

Byassee and Casey, like many religious leftists, practice a politically expedient expansionist interpretation of the Scriptures. Biblical admonitions to treat strangers kindly become political demands for abolishing immigration law. Biblical commands to feed the hungry become political demands for an unrestricted welfare state. Biblical aspirations for peace become political demands for unilateral disarmament. In fact, the Scriptures almost never offer the specific public policy guidance that the religious left, even more than the religious right, effusively likes to claim.

Serious Christian moral reasoning calls for more than the religious left's kind of bumper sticker sloganeering. Can the United States or any country accept unrestricted numbers of immigrants while remaining a viable nation state? Is giving automatic citizenship rights to illegal Mexican immigrants fair to millions of other potential immigrants from more distant but far more impoverished lands, not to mention those who are actively persecuted for their political beliefs or religious faith? Will an unrestricted flow of Mexican immigrants into the United States facilitate or delay economic improvement for Mexico? What is illegal immigration's impact on crime in the United States? And how does illegal immigration affect the living standards of legal immigrants and citizens?

These difficult questions are not likely to get serious answers from religious left activists, who, while twisting the Bible grossly out of context, prefer to portray the immigration debate as a battle between pious Good Samaritans and frothing xenophobes.



Conference for United Methodists Advocates Pacifism

by Julia Robb

Several United Methodist theologians, bishops, pastors, and peace activists recently argued that Christians should support non-violence in all circumstances. They cited two main reasons for this stance. First, they interpreted John Wesley as espousing an anti-war theology of peace. Second, they understood Jesus as teaching pacifism. These claims were made at a conference entitled "Building a Wesleyan Theology of Peace for the 21st Century," held September 28–October 1 in San Francisco.

The United Methodist *Social Principles* reject "war as an instrument of national foreign policy." But they also allow that war can be a "last resort in the prevention of such evils as genocide, brutal suppression of human rights, and unprovoked international aggression." However, nearly all the speakers at the San Francisco conference seemed to suggest that war was unacceptable in all circumstances.

John Wesley believed war "is proof of original sin and systemic evil," and also believed Jesus' teachings should be practiced "now" and not in the "sweet by and by," said UM pastor Greg Bergquist of Santa Rosa, California. Wesley, he said, believed in transforming the nation. Simply transforming individuals is not enough.

Americans believe in the "myth of redemptive violence," charged Dr. Richard Hays, a New Testament professor at Duke Divinity School, whereas Jesus himself did not "buy into that myth." The entire New Testament preaches peace and non-resistance, Hays said, declaring, "To be a Christian peacemaker is to put your body on the line."

The conference was hosted by Temple United Methodist Church and sponsored by Methodists United for Peace with Justice. Methodists United, an advocacy organization founded in 1987 to work for nuclear disarmament, is not officially affiliated with the United Methodist Church. But several United Methodist conferences do give annual grants to the DC-based organization. The United Methodist General Board of Church and Society gave Methodists United a \$2,500 grant for the San Francisco conference, according to Howard Hallman, Methodists United chairman.

Speakers' messages varied in tone and nuance. Bergquist said he

believes in civil disobedience as a means of resistance and he struggles with what should follow if civil disobedience does not succeed.

Hays said he believes authorities may have a role in punishing "evildoers." But "deciding the role of authority, whether Christians are to participate in exercising that power of punishing evildoers, is an enormously difficult problem." Christians, however, should tell the United States government to "stop using war as an instrument of foreign policy," Hays said.

The majority of speakers, including UM Bishops C. Dale White and Forrest Stith and retired Bishop Roy Sano, preached an absolute refusal to use military force for any reason. "War is not reasonable," White insisted. "It is an ultimate illustration of evil, so why do we continue to blunder into war?"

Despite Temple United Methodist pastor Schuyler Rhodes' plea that conference attendees "park" their "ideology at the door," some speakers brought their ideology with them.

Mubarak Awad, of Nonviolence International, spent much of

Awad alleged that the United States is destroying Iraqi culture and traditions because it does not understand Iraqi society. He demanded that the Bush administration should be "brought to court" and accused of killing "so many people" in Iraq.

his talk supporting the Palestinian cause, as did Stith. Awad said religion is worsening the conflict in the Middle East because "it's become a Christian-Muslim fight" while it really should be a "Palestinian-Jewish fight." Palestinians feel they have done all

they can to make peace with Israel and all they want is a two-state solution, he claimed. But the Palestinians feel themselves powerless because Israel has the power to unjustly jail them.

"As long as the United States continues to support Israel 100 percent," Awad warned, the Arab nations "will continue to support the Palestinians 100 percent." The Palestinian Christian activist also alleged that the United States is destroying Iraqi culture and traditions because it does not understand Iraqi society. He demanded that the Bush administration should be "brought to court" and accused of killing "so many people" in Iraq.

"Let the court decide if the war is just or unjust," Awad declared, advising conference attendees to find a judge who would serve a subpoena to President George Bush or Vice President Dick Cheney. "It's time to stop this madness," he said.

Stith claimed that Americans support Israel because they feel guilty about the Holocaust and anti-Semitism. "If we cannot say a pox on both their houses [Israelis and Palestinians], we cannot stand at all," the bishop asserted.

Stith recalled visiting with Palestinians and witnessing their children "propagandized" to accept violence against Israel. He blamed this propaganda upon "our blind American support for Israel," as if Palestinians would otherwise have been entirely peaceful. Stith later said he spoke in favor of obtaining justice for the Palestinians rather than supporting Israel in its fight against terrorism because America's mass media favors Israel.

Sano seemed to be coming from a rather different perspective. The retired bishop questioned using Wesley as a theological or practical guide. Methodists should challenge Wesley's concept of "common sense," he said, because "common sense is often just dominant opinion." Sano was referring to one of the components of the "Wesleyan quadrilateral," a later phrase summarizing Wesley's reliance on Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason (or "common sense").

Other speakers at the conference used the quadrilateral as evidence that Wesley had pacifist leanings. But Sano asserted: "When we continue to appeal to John Wesley, we are appealing to a certain ethnicity. Part of his appeal is he represents a theology and part of that theology comes from a white world and a male."

Moreover, Wesley rationalized it was right for Americans to revolt against England, Sano said, implying that it was wrong to do so. Methodists have "raised Wesley to the level of sanctity," the bishop complained. In a later interview, Sano said he feels great prejudice has been directed against him because he is an Asian-American, to the point that he feels other United Methodist bishops have disdained his view of John Wesley.

The religious right represents "a resurgence of white ethnicity," Sano charged, adding he believes the "neocons" are "behind it." He alleged, "We are now being led by the Roman gods of iron and fire," theorizing that conservative Christians support the war in Iraq because they were "humiliated in Vietnam" and other world hot spots.

Kevin Burke, dean of the Jesuit School of Theology, in Berkeley, California, rejected



SENSELESS. Recently retired United Methodist Bishop Roy Sano said Methodists should challenge Wesley's concept of "common sense" if it does not lead to peace.

the Roman Catholic "just war" tradition—which basically sets conditions for when the use of force may be necessary. But Burke added that he would give the "benefit of the doubt to people who do not agree with me."

Rhodes, true to his plea to leave ideology at the door, did not mention politics at all. His consistent theme in a fiery sermon, a talk, and later interviews was that Jesus told Christians to turn the other cheek and no other response to evil is acceptable.

"All governments will fall, and they all have," Rhodes said in an interview. "Our first allegiance is to God and not to a government." Rhodes said he is "tired to death of people taking their ideology and stretching it over the Bible and trying to pretend they are being faithful."

"We have to let go of these things," he said. "We have to let God transform us. Unless we can do that, we are doomed and that's what this conference is all about."

In his sermon, Rhodes declared that he is not right nor left, or liberal or conservative, and is not anti-Bush: "I just don't care. We get too hung up on the politics of the moment."

"We are about transformation...and if we're about that, we will not tolerate violence," he said. Rhodes, an author of several books, said he has been arrested numerous times in connection with his peace work.

The conference also featured Arun Gandhi, grandson of Mahatma Gandhi.

The younger Gandhi said his grandfather spent an hour with him each day when he was 13 years old, counseling with him during a period when racially prejudiced South Africans were attacking him.

"Every aspect of our lives has been dominated by the culture of violence," he said, "so we have to become aware of this. How do we transform ourselves so we can transform the world?"

"Peace is not just the absence of war," Gandhi noted. "Peace is when we are at peace with ourselves."

In declaring war unacceptable to Christians, conference speakers pointed to Wesley's "Treatise on Original Sin," in which the evangelist wrote "There is a still more horrid reproach to the Christian name, yea, to the name of man, to all reason and humanity. There is war in the world! War between men! War between Christians! Now, who can reconcile war, I will not say to religion, but to any degree of reason or common sense?"

Both Hays and Bergquist, however, admitted that Wesley never explicitly said he believed in non-violence in all circumstances. Bergquist said Wesley can be read to support the "just war" tradition or pacifism. "We can infer a trend one way or another," he said. "That's all we can do." ✚

Julia Robb is a freelance journalist. She is the daughter of the late IRD founder, the Rev. Edmund Robb, Jr.

Misrepresenting IRD

by Erik Nelson

The Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD) has its share of critics. Some of the criticism directed at the IRD is willful in its disregard for truth—that is, those offering the criticism know it to be false, or at least should know so. For instance, the critics should know that the IRD is not seeking to destroy the mainline churches, and that we are not racist, “Dominionist,” or part of some vast CIA conspiracy. Other criticism is not willful in its distortions, but still makes me scratch my head in wonder for it being so off-the-mark.

A perfect example of such off-the-mark criticism appeared in the *Christian Century* magazine, which featured an exchange between Assistant Editor Jason Byassee and IRD’s UMAction Director Mark Tooley. Byassee had written a book review discussing the IRD, Tooley sent a letter to the editor in response, and Byassee replied. That last reply makes a number of assertions about the IRD which are, to put it mildly, false.

Byassee’s assertions epitomize much criticism of the IRD from the political and religious left. For instance, in response to Tooley’s mention of mainline church membership decline, Byassee says, “No mainline Christian can fail to attend to membership losses, but the idea that the mainline should salute the flag and vote Republican to attract members is theologically bankrupt.”

Byassee is right: such arguments would be theologically bankrupt, if anyone were actually making them. Indeed, the IRD has always made precisely the opposite argument. We believe that churches are unfaithful and foolish whenever they equate the Gospel with a particular ideology, political party, or nation.

Like most of IRD’s critics, Byassee assumes that because the IRD spends so much time criticizing church elites for taking liberal positions on public policy issues, that it is the “liberal” part of the equation that is the primary issue. But it is not. The issue is any church leader—liberal or conservative—who declares, “Thus says the Lord,” when the Lord has not said it.

We believe that the purpose of Scripture and the church is not to answer all public policy questions, but to point us toward salvation in Christ. Because those public policy questions are not answered definitively in Scripture, Christians are offered a rather wide degree of freedom when it comes to politics, and in particular, how Christian principles might be applied to political questions.

The IRD does not believe that Scripture offers us a clear picture as to what government can or should do about, for instance, poverty, though Scripture does offer some examples of what individuals and the church should do. Christians can disagree about the best way to help the poor. Many believe that large government entitlement programs are the solution; other Christians disagree. In conforming to the partisan form of other Washington lobby offices, the church has stripped itself of its unique moral voice.

Rather, we would have the church expend its social witness “capital” on reminding people of what the Gospel says about the poor, our commitment to helping those in need, and the role this service plays in God’s plan of salvation through Jesus Christ.

The IRD has opposed resolutions at church legislative meetings

that force the church to take positions on controversial political issues, endorsing or rejecting specific pieces of legislation. It has never pushed the church to take positions that were aligned with the Republican Party. Some issues that the IRD has championed include: calling on churches to develop more programs to strengthen marriage, calling attention to human rights abuses in places like Sudan and Cuba, and calling for open meetings of church agencies.

If we are to take Byassee and other IRD critics seriously, one would expect we would be pushing resolutions asking the church to endorse the Iraq war and the Republican tax cuts. We’ve done none of those things.

Faithful Christians active in the public square will frequently need to engage in partisan political activity. But they should not try to do so through the church. Instead, Christians should seek out parachurch organizations whose members join because they share the same assumptions about and prescriptions for specific policy questions.

Some churches feel it necessary to have a position on every controversial issue. Our current political divisions have thus been dragged into our churches, resulting in steep membership decline. Some members leave because they feel judged for not agreeing with the church’s position on public policy. Others leave because the whole debate has distracted their church from the work of the Gospel.

Byassee notes, “This is not to say that mainline shrinkage is necessarily due to prophetic boldness, as liberals in the church often maintain. But the charge of ‘numerical decline’ is not a theological argument.”

Byassee is right. Again, however, he is criticizing an argument IRD has never made. While numerical decline is not in itself a theological argument, it should occasion some reflection about the fruit of our churches, and our identity. And those *are* theological questions. What do we expect from our churches? What does this decline in numbers signify? Mainline church leaders have been dismissive of such questions. Our churches seem unwilling to take note that numerical decline might indicate a problem that needs addressing.

Our proposed solution to the problem of membership decline is not, as Byassee suggests with Hauerwasian contempt, to “salute the flag and vote Republican.” Indeed, such jingoism would not change the problem at all. It would merely invert the problem. The solution is to be rid of partisanship altogether. And that means finding a social witness for the church that is not beholden to either party, but to Jesus Christ—one to which Christians of all stripes can ascribe together, even as they disagree about the particulars concerning public policy.

Such a witness is not as difficult as it might sound. In our churches are broad swaths of agreement concerning the principles that should govern Christian engagement with the world.

We at the IRD are not beyond criticism, of course, and I have no doubt that there are many legitimate criticisms that could be made of us and our work. But we are not guilty of the sins Byassee alleges. We are open to hearing criticism of our work, but such criticism should be based on what the IRD actually says and does, not on convenient assumptions and straw men.

I suspect Byassee and others would have some interesting disagreements with IRD’s perspective, as I’ve laid it out above. It would be an interesting conversation. But so long as Byassee and others continue to misrepresent IRD, that conversation will never happen. ✚

Church Leaders Reflect on 9/11 Anniversary

by Steve Rempé

As Americans paused to remember the fifth anniversary of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, it would be natural to assume that some people would look to their church leaders for understanding, solace, and encouragement. Those who visited the websites of the mainline Protestant denominations and ecumenical organizations would have found some of those pastoral responses. However, they were also likely to find much political commentary on the Middle East. What they would not have found was any discussion of the nature of the original attacks and attackers, nor any reflection on Christian teachings about human sinfulness. In at least one instance, there was no acknowledgement of the anniversary at all.

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH

An example of using the 9/11 anniversary as a platform for political commentary could be found in the statement of the Most Rev. Frank Griswold, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church. While urging readers to “wage reconciliation” by “bearing one another’s burdens across the divides of culture, religion, and differing views of the world,” Griswold failed to even mention the word “terrorism.” The perpetrators of the attack were mentioned vaguely and in passing. No mention was made of their religion, nor of the religious nature of their cause. Islam was mentioned only once—in a sentence encouraging Americans to examine “our own nation’s relationship to the Muslim world as recommended by the 9/11 commission.”

Bishop Griswold used his reflections on the 9/11 attacks as a platform for political commentary. Speaking of the U.S. military role in Iraq, he said, “I pray that hubris not provoke our nation to stay a course that does not appear to be working, and that pride not blind our eyes to alternative strategies.” He offered no suggestions on what “alternative strategies” might be more effective.

Another issue Griswold raised was the inequality of wealth between nations. “I believe it is more urgent than ever that the United States address the vast disparity of wealth of nations such as our own and the extreme poverty of nearly half of the world’s people,” he said, claiming that such an inequality “breeds further conflict and instability.”

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

The General Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church offered on its website a collection of worship materials for use in services commemorating the 9/11 attacks. Among the resources was a “Reflection for the Fifth Anniversary of September 11, 2001,” by Taylor Burton-Edwards, Director of Worship for the Board of Discipleship. In his comments, Burton-Edwards lamented our inability to leave

the events of 9/11 behind:

Our government is still engaged in military action in Afghanistan and Iraq as part of this nation’s “War on Terror,” while new terrorist violence seems to be breaking out with increasing frequency both in those places and around the world. We have not given ourselves the time apart to reflect, to grieve, or to heal. Our wounds are still open, and the losses keep climbing. The five years that have passed may provide us few, if any, signs of redemption.

The implication was that the “War on Terror” was failing. The denial of any “signs of redemption” read as an indictment of the Bush administration’s post 9/11 policies. It was not clear, however, what any president could do to bring “redemption.” One would hope that United Methodists were looking for a more worthy Savior to provide “signs of redemption.”

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

The National Council of Churches’ (NCC) statement on 9/11 began with a word of assurance that “our loving God has granted them [the victims of 9/11] a place of peace, where the troubles and sorrows of this world can touch them no more.” But by the fifth paragraph it launched into a political discourse about U.S. policy in the Middle East. This discourse continued through the next nine paragraphs.

NCC Associate General Secretary Antonios Kireopoulos lamented “the distractions of the war in Iraq.” He contended that the best way to support the troops in Iraq is by “creating a withdrawal plan that brings their sacrifices to an end.” NCC General Secretary Bob Edgar warned that the United States should not “contemplate another invasion, another war” to stop the Iranian nuclear program.

Kireopoulos urged the United States, in the words of the NCC press release, “to commit the necessary resources to finding the actual perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks, and bringing them to justice through internationally recognized judicial processes in the U.S.” The NCC official did not say who those perpetrators might be or what cause they might be espousing.

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)

The most peculiar response to the fifth anniversary of 9/11 was the apparent lack of any acknowledgement on the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) website. In the days around September 11, the PCUSA website chose instead to devote its front page to the upcoming United Nations-inspired International Day of Prayer for Peace and HIV/AIDS Awareness Sunday. Perhaps the denomination had already made its comment in July, when its Westminster John Knox Press published David Ray Griffin’s *Christian Faith and the Truth behind 9/11*, alleging that “the Bush-Cheney administration orchestrated 9/11 in order to promote this [American] empire under the pretext of the so-called war on terror.”



Recollections of a New Staff Member

by Ralph Webb



While I am new to the IRD as the Director of Anglican Action, I have my share of memories relating to Anglican renewal efforts in the past decade. Here are a few snapshots from General Conventions past.

72ND General Convention, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, July 1997: My first experience

with the IRD involves handing out flyers for a persecuted-church rally being held one muggy evening outside the convention center. Faith McDonnell, IRD's Director of Religious Liberty, is there, as is former IRD President Diane Knippers. As I offer flyers to passersby, some are grateful for the information and thank me. Most, though, appear puzzled. Religious liberty issues apparently aren't on some of their radar screens.

73RD General Convention, Denver, Colorado, July 2000: Every afternoon, a different speaker tackles a different topic relating to the American Anglican Council's (AAC's) theme of "God's Love Changed Me." This theme proves successful, attracting the attention of the media and convention attendees. One rector tells me that there is a stronger effort by orthodox Episcopalians at this convention than at any previous one.

At an IRD-sponsored rally on behalf of the Sudan, Bishop Peter Munde speaks passionately about the atrocities being suffered by fellow Anglicans and other Christians there.

74TH General Convention, Minneapolis, Minnesota, July/August 2003: "IRD: We Don't Compromise Because We Want to Demonize" charges the headline of Every Voice Network's daily publication. It's only the second or third day of the convention, and it's the first of an almost-daily barrage of attack pieces from the liberal network.

A representative from the pro-homosexuality group Integrity and I, despite our differences, work together in running errands for the committee that we are both monitoring. After several days of such cooperation, I ask her if there's any way I can pray for her. Her stunned expression speaks volumes about the distrust between our groups and is heartbreaking.

After a tense session of the House of Bishops concludes with consent to the election of the openly gay Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire, many of us are overcome with emotion. Some find a relatively less public spot in the convention center to weep. Others express their grief more publicly at the AAC worship service that immediately follows the decision.

The combined AAC/Forward in Faith Eucharist the next morning is an instrument of healing; many among us cite it as the highlight of the convention. The ashes on our foreheads, an expression of our repentance, are criticized by some progressives as show-manship.

75TH General Convention, Columbus, Ohio, June 2006: Our team is much smaller and our base is farther away from the convention center than in either 2000 or 2003. The greater distance seems to reflect the ever-widening gulf between the orthodox and progressives, as also between the Episcopal Church and the majority of the Anglican Communion.

The special committee working on *Windsor Report* resolutions is divided between those advocating the use of *Windsor Report* language, to satisfy the concerns of the Anglican Communion, and others adamantly opposing such language.

The rumor that Katharine Jefferts-Schori has been elected Presiding Bishop spreads quickly a good half-hour before any announcement is made, and hundreds enter the House of Deputies to hear the official results. The majority in the room is ecstatic upon hearing the official word, and joyful shouts erupt. Only a few days later, however, many progressives are disenchanted with the Presiding Bishop-elect after she influences the House to pass a resolution advising "restraint" in the consecration of candidates whose "manner of life" presents a challenge to the Anglican Communion.

By the end of the convention, a wistful mood pervades among the orthodox. Some say that they don't expect to return in 2009 and will miss the friendships made over the course of conventions. Any sadness, however, is tempered by a stronger optimism that God will lead, guide, and provide for us whatever the future holds. ✚



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