

# He's No Clinton Clone

When Tony Blair prays, he does so on his knees.

**T**he verdict is already in: Tony Blair is a sort of Limey clone of Bill Clinton, a fellow who intuitively seeks the political center, is relentlessly telegenic, doesn't commit himself to huge promises, and can turn on a dime when necessary. He is what the British press has called him: Tony Blur. What's more, he and Clinton are both lawyers married to lawyers possibly a lot smarter than they are. Blair's election campaign even borrowed some techniques from the Democrats. So, the thinking goes, given Blair's stunning success, the Clinton model of politician really could be the wave of the future.

Not so fast. The jury is still out on Blair's Labour government. As with every British prime minister before him, Blair will soon enough have made his share of mistakes and been side-swiped by unanticipated events. Party squabbling will likely break out, and how he deals with it and with the Tory opposition will speak volumes about his untested leadership skills. The reformist zeal betrayed in his promise to be "a lot more radical in governing than many people think" could provoke a backlash against his government.

All of that said, Blair does mark something entirely new in Labour and British politics. No Labour leader before him has ever linked his rejection of Marxism explicitly to his Christian faith, and no British politician this century has explained his political convictions in terms of a decisive religious experience. In this respect, he and Clinton may be equally telegenic—they may even get on

famously—but in the place where ideas of heart and head usually come together, on their knees, they're more than an ocean apart.

Blair, unlike Clinton, did not come from a dysfunctional, lower middle-class background with parental alcoholism hanging over his head. On the contrary, his father, Leo Blair, was a distinguished academic whom Blair admired and respected and who for a while was a leading light at the county level in the Conservative Party in the north of England. But for a debilitating stroke that left him without speech for three years, Leo Blair might well have become a Tory MP. Tony attended an exclusive but austere preparatory school in Scotland that reinforced the personal discipline he's maintained to this day. At Oxford, where he studied three years after Clinton, he had plenty of girlfriends and gave popular parties. But he never even went near a joint, much less inhaled one, a form of parentally imposed self-denial that made him seem almost eccentric among his university peers.

He was even more unfashionable in another area: at a time when hedonistic agnosticism was absolutely *de rigueur* among undergraduates, Blair publicly converted to Christianity. He did so at least in part under the influence of Peter Thomson, a left-leaning Australian clergyman in his college who combined a staunch belief in traditional Christian doctrines with an underdog's view of social justice. He was no utopian, and would have disdained the facile anti-capitalism of Carl Oglesby and Saul Alinsky that Hillary Clinton embraced. As an adult Blair was confirmed in the Church of England. Though

very much "a bleeding heart" at that time, according to one contemporary, he was also absorbing the socialist ideas of Archbishop William Temple who supported the British Labour movement in the 1920's, and the anti-Marxist communitarian, John Macmurray, whom he visited in Scotland. More than anything else, Blair later wrote, "Christianity helped inspire my rejection of Marxism."

That confessional comment appeared in a surprisingly candid article for the London *Daily Telegraph* during Easter 1996, entitled "Why I am a Christian." The piece raised eyebrows everywhere, not least in the Labour Party, which for decades was the proud keeper of militant British secularism, and one of whose recent leaders, Neil Kinnock, had himself been an avowed atheist. "He is publicly willing to be known as a Christian at a time when it is not fashionable to be one," says Roy McCloughrey, who interviewed Blair three years ago for his book *Belief in Politics* and who is convinced of Blair's sincerity. Blair told the *Telegraph* that concern for the greater good and the interests of the community derived from "a sense of individual duty," which was "a principle the church celebrates in the sacrament of communion." He and his Roman Catholic wife Cherie attend a Catholic church in North London, where Blair as a non-Catholic does not take communion. It's the sort of inconsistency that most Brits these days couldn't care less about.

They do, however, seem intrigued by something not seen in a British government for more than four decades: Regular church-goers comprise at least half of Blair's cabinet, and two members, Home Secretary Jack Straw and junior Health Minister Paul Boateng, went through faith-reawakening experiences themselves in the past two years.

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Understandably, before the recent election Prime Minister John Major tried to take issue with Blair's left-leaning interpretation of Christian ethics. "The Conservative Party is founded on principles flowing from the Christian faith," he insisted, adding that he prayed "in all circumstances." But this missed the point. At a time when less than five percent of the British population attends church of any kind (compared with 40 percent in the U.S.), Blair has returned the Labour Party to its pre-Marxist roots in British evangelicalism. It was William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, who in the 1880's initiated the practice of providing unemployment insurance and legal aid for the poor. Keir Hardie, who founded the Independent Labour Party in 1893, and in 1906 became the first leader of the Labour Party in the House of Commons, was an ardent Christian Socialist. Before Blair, Labour Party leaders paid public lip-service to Christianity, but privately often wise-cracked that the Church of England was "the Tory Party at prayer." Kinnock was the first to be open about his unbelief. Now Blair has changed the debate.

He has framed the argument, moreover, in a way that is both modest ("I do not discuss my religious beliefs unless asked, and when I do I discuss them personally") and intelligent ("Christianity is optimistic about the human condition, but not naive").

What a contrast to Bill Clinton's do-it-yourself ethics, in which his Southern Baptist faith has seemed little more than a label of convenience, a point of emotional and cultural contact with the world of his childhood and his South, but having no discernible impact on any of his ideas or behavior. Clinton knows how to perform the expected White House rituals of American civic religion: inviting in Billy Graham, attending major funerals, speaking at the National Prayer Breakfast each winter. But his own faith too often seems like just another display of the chameleon president: sincere at the time of expression, pleasing to many, but neither more nor less rooted in his soul than playing golf, smoking cigars, and being late.

Clinton's religious beginnings were promising enough. An eager Sunday

School pupil at the Park Place Baptist Church in Hot Springs, he later attended a Billy Graham crusade, went through water baptism, and even sent money to Graham headquarters. It was Georgetown University, however, that proved an ideal spot for his Christianity: culturally, religion there was visible enough to provide some intellectual stimulus in his Jesuit-run courses, flexible enough to embrace any political turn that seemed useful, and distant enough not to interfere at all with his personal behavior.

On occasion, Clinton has appeared to be genuinely touched by Christian spirituality. As governor, he happened (while campaigning) on a Pentecostal camp meeting. The rousing worship and music clearly moved him, so he went back several times even when he wasn't campaigning. "He loves our music, he loves connecting with Spirit-filled people," Anthony Mangun, the Oneness Pentecostal pastor who befriended Clinton, recently told *Charisma* magazine. Mangun and family members have stayed overnight in the White House and played golf with the First Golfer.

Friendship aside, what is one to make of the veritable procession of Christian clergy and mildly New Age gurus who have overnighted at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue or visited with the president? One participant at such a session says that Clinton agreed with everything that was said, and then did exactly the opposite on policy. A veritable galaxy of preaching visitors has come down against partial birth abortions, for instance, with no apparent impact on White House policy.

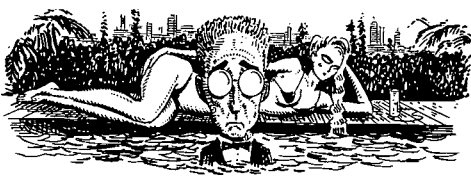
Rex Horne, Clinton's Southern Baptist pastor from Little Rock, is in frequent contact. So is "possibility thinker" Robert Schuller, of California's Crystal Cathedral and the TV program "Hour of Power." So is Bill Hybels, pastor of Chicago's gargantuan (22,000) Willow Creek Church. So is Paul Cain, a modern Pentecostal "prophet" who surprised many evangelical and charismatic Christians early on in Clinton's tenure by predicting that Clinton would be a great president and perform great things for the Lord. Clinton, not surprisingly, called him in for an intimate conversation.

Clinton has also reached out to liberals like Joan Brown Campbell, general sec-

retary of the National Council of Churches, and Rabbi Kushner, author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. He even has a personal spiritual guru of sorts, Tony Campolo, an American Baptist professor at Pennsylvania's Eastern College. An engaging, very funny evangelical, Campolo has spent hours with Clinton. Once the president took him up to Lincoln's second-floor White House office and reflected on how Lincoln, not particularly spiritual before entering office, had been driven to his knees by the burden of presidential responsibility. On two occasions Clinton has tracked down a traveling Campolo to ask him questions about the Bible. What effect this theological chumminess has had on Clinton's religious beliefs remains an open question. Hillary, by contrast, though better-versed in the Bible than her husband, has some distinctly unorthodox ideas. According to one intimate, she believes that the Jesus who died on the cross can come to her through adherents of other religions, Native American shamans, for example.

Does Clinton pray, either in the breezy "all circumstances" of John Major or the anguished multiple times a day of Jimmy Carter when he was president? We don't know. What we do know is that Clinton sees himself as a spiritual near-martyr in the cross-hairs of a relentlessly hostile Washington media and political establishment. His whiny remarks at the Washington presidential prayer breakfast last February ("We are in a world of hurt. We need help. We are in the breach") merely reinforced the impression that his faith is often purely sentimental, empty of philosophy and consistency, and, above all, self-serving.

Tony Blair is certainly not perfect, either. He will have to account, for example, as Clinton will, for his broad tolerance of legalized abortion in virtually all circumstances, even though he claims to be "personally" opposed to the procedure. But Blair has admitted that Christianity is a "tough" religion, has laid his philosophical head on the block in espousing it, and has dared to be genuinely original in the context of British politics. There is an integrity in this enterprise, even if we disagree with him. Clinton no doubt wishes the same could be said about him. ❀



# My Mom

**T**he worst day of my life. I awoke early for me, about 8 a.m., to get ready to go to New York City to speak at the annual dinner of the National Right to Life Committee. Burning Santa Anas were blowing through the window. Usually the mornings here are cool even in summer, but today, the wind is not just warm but searing. I closed the windows and put on the air conditioning.

Then I remembered that my wife had told me that my mother had been feeling really bad yesterday. Mom had been through a rough week—bad one day, better the next, then bad again. Saturday had been a good day. With far more than her usual vigor, she had said that she was feeling “much, much better.” But Sunday she had been weak and my father was worried.

I called my father and he answered in a rush. “How are things there?” I asked.

“Miserable,” my father said. “Mom is feeling bad and I called the ambulance and they’re here now working on her.”

I felt disorganized inside, and I said, “Should I change my flight and come to Washington instead of New York? I can easily do it if things are bad.”

“No, no,” my father said. “The paramedic says he thinks it’s under control. Just stay in touch.”

“Paramedic?” I don’t like the sound of this at all.

But my father hates being swamped with visitors, even his son, when he is worried. So I went off to the airport in a long black car with a driver whom I do not remember at all. I just recall hearing on

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the radio that as of 8 a.m., it was 91 degrees, a new record for that time of the morning.

The airport was a mob scene, as usual. I boarded the plane and got into my seat. Who should be in front of me but Anthony Edwards, of “E.R.” fame, along with his wife and two sweet little kids. What an irony. My mother is with the paramedics and the emergency room people from George Washington University and I am with the actor/doctor from TV’s emergency room. There is a certain symbolism here.

After about an hour, I picked up the airfone and called my sister. Today is the first night of Passover, and Rachel is preparing a big Seder. She is next to the phone moment by moment. She will surely know how my mother is doing.

Her maid answered. “She’s out of town,” said the maid.

“No, she can’t be,” I said. “It’s Passover and she’s making Seder.”

“Yes,” said the maid. “Her mother is very sick in the hospital in Washington, and she flew down there.”

I called my nephew, Jonathan, who lives near her and would surely know what was going on. “Grandma stopped breathing and she’s on life support at George Washington Hospital,” Jonathan said.

“What!”

“Yes, and you should call your father and see what’s going on. I’ll be here to tell you if I find out anything.”

By a horrible coincidence, the airfone stopped working at that moment. I tried a few phones and none of them worked.

I got back to my Mozart on the Discman and listened to the *Requiem* and fell asleep. The flight attendants, of course, woke me up to ask what kind of salad dressing I wanted. I told them I was not hungry, and I thought about what was

going on. My mother has congestive heart failure. She’s been on borrowed time for a year or so. She’s heavily medicated. She is a match stick, thin and weak. When you borrow time, you have to pay it back.

The first class cabin was blessedly quiet and I could think, in a semi-conscious haze. I thought back to my mother teaching me how to skip in our tiny little house on Caroline Avenue in Silver Spring. I so badly wanted to learn, and she just started skipping around her room. “First you sort of slide on one foot, then on the other, and pretty soon you’re skipping,” she said, and pretty soon I was.

I remembered her teaching me to ride a two-wheeler at about the same time or maybe a little later. First it had training wheels and then it had my father and her holding me and pushing me down Caroline Avenue, and then I was on my own.

Mozart was washing over me and I could remember more recent events. My parents have lived in the Watergate now since 1973. Whenever I visited and then left to go back to Los Angeles, my mother would walk me down a long hall to the elevator. She didn’t kiss me or hug me. She just looked at me as if she were putting the vision into the bank. I kissed her. When I left to go to the airport, she and my father would go down to the front of the Watergate to watch me get into the car and leave. My father would wave at me and then sensibly go back inside if it was cold. But my little frail mother would watch me until I was gone, no matter what the weather. Putting the vision in the bank.

I came to the end of the *Requiem* and then to the wonderful *Laudate Dominum*, and then I put down the earphones and called my wife at her office. Maybe she knew something.