

Dobson's Choice

Politics and the Spirit of Martyrdom

by Aaron D. Wolf

During the 1990's, under the guidance of Rush Limbaugh and Newt Gingrich, the Christian Right learned to hate Hillary Clinton, and all her lies, and all her empty promises. To them, she is (to borrow from Dr. Sam Loomis) pure evil. She is a feminist who looks down her nose at women who stay home and bake cookies, and she tried to nationalize Hillary-Care and threatens to do so again, and she just sounds angry all the time. But the Big Thing, the focal point of the wrath of the Christian Right, has been her advocacy for abortion. She, along with the godless Democrats, supports abortion "rights"; we, as members of the Party of Lincoln, do not.

That simple credo is changing, now that the openly pro-abortion Rudy Giuliani has emerged as a Republican front runner, together with Fred Thompson and Mitt Romney. For many pro-life Christians, none of these candidates will do. Fred Thompson wants to see *Roe v. Wade* overturned and the issue returned to the states (where he would also like to see the status of "gay marriage" decided). And Mitt Romney, in addition to supervising the advent of Mr. and Mrs. Adam and Steve in Massachusetts, has flip-flopped on abortion once already; he could do so again. And of course, he wears sacred drawers and may be president of his own planet some day, a fact that is disturbing to a host of Christian voters.

Dr. James Dobson, who has assumed (or been given) the mantle of elder statesman for the Christian Right, now that Jerry Falwell is gone and Pat Robertson has been linked more with protein shakes than with political sanity, is sticking to his guns when it comes to abortion. "If neither of the two major political parties nominates an individual who pledges himself or herself to the sanctity of human life," he wrote in an op-ed in the *New York Times*, "we will join others in voting for a minor party candidate."

The "we" in his statement refers to a late-September meeting in Salt Lake City of 50 pro-life leaders, who are admittedly conflicted over which candidate to support. Nonetheless, "Those agreeing with the proposition were invited to stand. The result was almost unanimous."

Dobson may care little for the notion of limited government, the Christian theory of just war, or the concept of federalism, but he is consistent when it comes to his core beliefs. "Speaking personally, and not for the organization I represent or the other leaders gathered in Salt Lake City, I firmly believe that the selection of a president should begin with a recommitment to traditional moral values and beliefs." Atop his list are the sanctity of human life and the institution of marriage. "Only after that determination is made can the acceptability of a nominee be assessed."

After this article appeared, Sean Hannity butted heads with

Dobson on *Hannity & Colmes*. Echoing the hand-wringing neocons, Hannity laid out the bottom line for Dr. Dobson: "[I]f, in fact, you were to mount a third-party challenge and support a third-party candidate, the result [according to a recent Rasmussen poll] 'would be a landslide victory for Hillary Clinton.'"

Dobson, in turn, upped the ante, stating that, in effect, a Hillary Clinton victory over Giuliani would be *good* for the pro-life movement. "If it's Hillary, as bad as she is, there will be a mobilization to fight what she's trying to do. If [Giuliani] is put in office by conservatives and by those who are pro-life and pro-marriage, pro-family, I'm afraid that we will not recover from it."

In Dobson's frank assessment, there is the faint echo of Tertullian's famous statement that "in the blood of the martyrs lies the seed of the Church." In the face of great persecution, the faithful are stimulated to persevere, which, in turn, causes others to see and hear their witness and be drawn to their cause. Indeed, if Hillary Clinton is seated in the Oval Office, she will likely become a focal point for the rage of pro-life Christians, and calls for her defeat will become a rallying cry. Inspired by their hatred for Hillary, hitherto lukewarm anti-abortionists might be stirred to action, might pass out more voter's guides next time, might make new converts of unbelievers.

If Giuliani wins, on the other hand, then, according to Dobson, "the pro-life, the pro-family movement is gone." What, exactly, does that mean? Does it mean that, for at least four years, there would be no chance of a Republican president signing a human-life amendment to the Constitution? Does it mean accepting the fact that the best we could hope for would be that decisions regarding abortion and "gay marriage" would be returned to the states? Does it mean that, during a Giuliani presidency, it would be difficult for pro-life and pro-family organizations to raise money? Does it signal the removal of the pro-life plank from the GOP platform? While Dobson undoubtedly has these in mind, he is suggesting more, a worse prospect for marriage and for the unborn. *The pro-life and the pro-family movements would be gone.*

Dobson's moribund statement implies that the Christian commitment to the sanctity of human life and the Christian witness to the traditional family are hanging by a political thread. After all, we are only talking about the election of a president, and while, admittedly, the power of the executive branch has grown and continues to grow by leaps and bounds, Dobson's prophecy seems to suggest that the U.S. president has the power to cripple and even to kill the deep-seated convictions of vast numbers of Christian activists, volunteers, and just plain decent folks who oppose killing the preborn and blessing sodomites.

No, some might argue, Dobson said that the pro-life and pro-family *movements* would be gone, not the beliefs and commitments of Christians. But what is behind the movement, if not the moral convictions of Christians, the foot soldiers of the

Aaron D. Wolf is the associate editor of *Chronicles*.

movement? And why is it that a Republican pro-abortion president is capable of deflating the aspirations of the faithful, while the exact opposite is true if a Democratic pro-abortion candidate wins the White House?

Dr. Dobson and the Christian Right are confusing the success of political agendas—GOP agendas, in particular—with the survival of Christian morality in America. They have spent decades building a coalition of single-issue voters (now dual-issue voters, with the advent of the “gay marriage” question) who focus on the most “electable” Republican candidate who is willing to say *Yes, I’m pro-life*, even though these candidates have done precious little to reward the Christian Right’s efforts. This coalition believes the media when it tells them that the GOP cannot win without them—and perhaps that is true. Now, it seems, this investment of years of grassroots campaigning, of blood, sweat, and tears, could be lost.

By their calculations, the coalition’s investment paid off last April, when Chief Justice John Roberts and Associate Justice Samuel Alito tipped the scales in favor of the Partial Birth Abortion Ban passed by Congress and signed by President George W. Bush in 2003. “This ruling reminds us that elections matter,” wrote Dobson immediately after the decision was handed down. “President Bush’s appointment of Samuel Alito provided the swing vote to protect this law. If John Kerry were President, partial birth abortion would still be legal in the land. In fact he voted against the ban six times as a Senator.”

Christians rejoiced in this victory against a truly evil procedure. The practice of partial-birth abortion is so barbaric that it is simply too gruesome to describe in these pages. It also represents something in the neighborhood of less than one quarter of one percent of the abortions performed in America. As he rejoiced, Dr. Dobson laid a wreath at the feet of the President: “[O]ne man—President George W. Bush, the most pro-life President in the United States’ history—has acted to protect children from the barbarity of partial birth abortion.” Indeed, he wrote, “a civilized society must not condone such compassionless and hideous acts against human beings.”

With less than one quarter of one percent of America’s annual 1.3 million abortions proscribed by federal law, we cannot say that we live in a civilized society. Indeed, our society could not be said to be civilized even if all abortions in the United States were outlawed tomorrow. And that is because we have frittered away the Christian convictions that created our civilization, trading our birthright for a pot of politics. We have placed our hopes not in the transforming power of the Gospel but in the edicts of Caesar. In the process, our faith itself has lost all of its sharp edges, becoming so benign that it draws little attention to us. Instead, what garners attention is our insistence that the unbelieving majority of our fellow citizens submit to our beliefs on abortion and “gay marriage.” These two issues have become the faith that we confess before men.

Historically, it has been the radical heretics who have insisted that, because government by nature tends toward corruption, Christians should have no part in it. But Christians who participate in government must be sober and recognize that legislation cannot save, in the ultimate sense, a hellbent people or its offspring. Saint Paul did, of course, instruct us to “honor the king,” and proclaimed “the powers that be are ordained of God,” but he was far more interested in making unbelievers into “fellow-citizens with the saints.” We are not Saint Paul, but neither are we members of a Christian nation or citizens of a Christian

country. Not only is our government openly hostile to our Faith, it is importing jihadist aliens who wish to claim our land for the *Dar al Islam*. Set aside the polls about Heaven and angels and even being “born again”: We are a minority; our numbers are shrinking; our churches are dying. Thus, if we wish to restore the civilization that has been lost, we have to pay more attention to our Faith and less attention to Republican politics. We have to baptize our children instead of trying to baptize our elections. We have to stay married instead of trying to define marriage.

Nineteen-hundred years ago, Christians were a minority in the Roman Empire. What was it that made them stand out? Did they picket the Roman baths or stage protests before the proconsuls? No, according to Pliny the Younger, the pagan governor of Pontus and Bithynia,

they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god, and to bind themselves by oath, not to some crime, but not to commit fraud, theft, or adultery, not falsify their trust, nor to refuse to return a trust when called upon to do so. When this was over, it was their custom to depart and to assemble again to partake of food—but ordinary and innocent food. Even this, they affirmed, they had ceased to do after my edict by which, in accordance with [Emperor Trajan’s] instructions, I had forbidden secret societies. Accordingly, I judged it all the more necessary to find out what the truth was by torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses. But I discovered nothing else but a perverse and extravagant superstition.

The myth of Christian America, perpetuated by distorted accounts of American history which insist that any deist President who mentioned “God” in a speech, from Jefferson to Lincoln, must have been “one of us,” has created a false confidence that we are just one election away from returning to our Christian Founding—if only we could end abortion . . . if only we could pass . . . if only Mike Huckabee . . . Such confidence, and the political maneuvering that often accompanies it, undermines the Christian desire to make a bold and clear confession of faith. A martyr, in the earliest sense, was a witness, someone who testified publicly. The Christians of the first and second centuries had Christ’s words ringing in their ears—“If you confess me before men, I will confess you before my father in heaven.” They harbored no illusions about their government; they strove to live peaceably among men, paying their taxes and dealing honestly in business, while “meeting on a fixed day at dawn” to confess in song that Christ is God. Their greatest concern was not with the political landscape but with working out their salvation, maintaining the purity of the Apostles’ doctrine, and performing acts of charity—which included, among other things, the adoption of exposed infants. Their great offense to their Roman masters was their refusal to burn incense to the emperor, a simple act and a signature that would spare their lives when they were put to the test. Instead, they witnessed for their Faith and paid the ultimate price.

Of course, things are different for us: We live in a democracy, and, as citizens of a democracy, we have never been asked to burn incense to the emperor; we just asked ourselves to preserve our Christian civilization by voting for the most pro-life President in U.S. history, even after he burned incense to Allah by declaring that Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike pray to him, then wished us all a happy Ramadan. ☞

Throne and Altar

by Hugh Barbour, O.Praem.

“Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God”
—1 Corinthians 10:31

My father, God rest his soul, was very fond of Thai food, with its quickly sautéed noodles and peppery élan. Not far from his condominium in the Rossmore section of Los Angeles, there was a practically endless selection of Thai places. One, I remember, was frequented by monks whose vermilion robes seemed like an authoritative advertisement for the peppers on our plates. In every one of these establishments (and we tried quite a few until Dad settled on his favorite), there was a little Buddhist shrine with some offerings before it along with a framed portrait of the king of Thailand, Bhumibol Adulyadej, Rama IX, the world's longest-reigning head of state, and the only one with a Swiss *baccalauréat* in Latin and Greek. Dad would inevitably exclaim, “Ah, the union of throne and altar!” (Sometimes, he would also ask, “Where’s the picture of Anna?”—but this nursery humor does not speak to our point here.)

Never had I thought of this expression, the kind Anglican vicars like to pronounce, as anything more than figurative until this year, when I stood before the legendary throne of Charlemagne in the imperial basilica of Aachen. I had seen a picture of the throne before, but only from the front. Viewed from the side, one discovers that the throne is also an altar. It was considered a relic, our guide explained, with its back slab, which forms the altarpiece, taken from the Anastasis in Jerusalem. Recent scholarship (German, of course), in spite of the clerical skepticism expressed by my guide, has determined that the throne-altar is really from the time of Charlemagne and not a century later, as was thought. According to Einhard, the emperor's official biographer, the Abbasid caliph Harun al Rashid gave the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to Charlemagne—no doubt to offer a keen slight to the Eastern emperors—as a personal property and enriched his legates with many gifts for their return to Aachen. Thus, the tradition of the reliquary altar-throne enjoys a genuine verisimilitude. Practically every legitimate and illegitimate claimant to European imperium has had to sit on this throne for at least the space of a paternoster or, in the 20th century, has gone to gawk at it. Thus Hitler even, and, in 1979, Giscard d'Estaing and Helmut Schmidt, the former of whom declared of the venue chosen for the discussion of European monetary policy at which *la douce France* was given quite a beating by the Bundesrepublik: “Perhaps when we discussed monetary problems, the spirit of Charlemagne brooded over us.” *Brooded* might just have been the right word, since it would seem that, in contemporary E.U. policy, the dearly purchased potters' field has replaced the freely given tomb of the Savior.

*Fr. Hugh is prior of St. Michael's Abbey
in Trabuco Canyon, California.*

A priest, of course, should have a lively interest in the placement of the altar he serves. Einhard and, before him, Eusebius and, before him, the author of the *Res Gestae* of Augustus (which Mussolini had meaningfully caused to be inscribed by the newly reconstructed *ara pacis*, the “altar of peace” in Rome) all recount the essential role of the civil sovereigns of their day in promoting and ordering the practice of religion. Christianity, unlike the other Roman religions before it, can surely exist without legitimization by the state, but whether it ever has for long, or whether it ought to, or whether the state can exist without religion are important questions—questions whose resolution is bound to be given in practice, even if it is avoided in theory.

What would Western Latin Christianity be without Charlemagne, or Slavic Christendom without Vladimir or the Nemanjas, or Lutheranism without Philip of Hesse, or Calvinism and Low Church Anglicanism without the house of Orange, or any of these without the original initiative of Constantine? Indeed, where would the supposedly apolitical and nonmagisterial Baptists be without American foreign policy and their chaplaincy to the presidents? And what, oh what would be the moral authority of the Holy See and its recently itinerant occupants, were its once explicit and now mostly implicit claim to temporal power not recognized by the greater number of governments? As for Judaism and Islamic states, they are inherently linked to earthly rule, but then, the one is the precursor and the other, the abusive distortion, of Christian polity.

What is the nature of the relation between religion and the state? To cut to the heart of the matter, we must step outside the context of the customary presentation of the problem of Church and state relations—namely, that of the Enlightenment—and, indeed, even outside the broader context that preceded it, that of the medieval confrontation between the papacy and the restored Western Roman Empire.

First of all, and apart from all theories and evaluations, the mutual influence of Church and state is a fact. Whether the state is directing the extent and quality of religious life among its people, or the Church is determining the limits of the legitimacy of the state, their reciprocal relationship is a reality. In the second place, and apart from all supernatural sublimations which, by God's initiative, may further elevate and perfect the merely human, the roots of this reality are to be traced most deeply in the principles which govern human nature—that is, in the natural law ascertainable by reason.

Human nature is specific; it is one thing shared by many by way of a material multiplication, or procreation. This is a point easily obscured if the revolutionary perspective of the Enlightenment dominates the discussion. Men are not first