

US attorney general invokes God in "war on terrorism"

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Since the September 11 terrorist attacks, the Christian right and its allies in the Republican Party have sought to stoke up religious intolerance. US Attorney General John Ashcroft still refuses to issue a forthright apology or disavow anti-Islamic comments he made last fall. In an interview with syndicated columnist and radio commentator Cal Thomas, Ashcroft declared, "Islam is a religion in which God requires you to send your son to die for him. Christianity is a faith in which God sends his son to die for you."

Christian Coalition founder Pat Robertson, an ideological soul mate of Ashcroft, declared on his television program, the "700 Club," that Islam "is not a peaceful religion that wants to coexist." Robertson continued: "They want to coexist until they can control, dominate and, if need be, destroy.... And the Koran makes it very clear, if you see an infidel, you are to kill him."

The remarks of Ashcroft at the National Religious Broadcasters (NRB) Convention last February in Nashville, Tennessee, where he invoked religion in support of Bush's "war on terrorism" and attacked the democratic and secularist underpinnings of the US Constitution, deserve particular note.

The NRB, which represents 1,400 Christian broadcasters, is an influential body of the religious right. It counts among its members such high-profile preachers as Jerry Falwell and James Dobson. The organization forced out its recently installed president, Wayne Pederson, for his suggestion that the group not identify itself so closely with the "far Christian right."

Ashcroft is himself a member of the Assemblies of God Church, the largest US Pentecostal denomination. It practices faith healing and believes that the Holy Spirit gives the baptized the ability to speak in tongues. The Assemblies of God considers abortion and homosexuality to be sins and believes social dancing to be a "great moral risk." It opposes coexistence with non-Christian religions, declaring on its web site [www.ag.org] that the Assemblies of God "disavows universalism and the toleration of world views that do not require entering the kingdom of God through the narrow gate of the God-man, Jesus Christ."

In his speech to the NRB, Ashcroft attempted to supply a religious justification for US military intervention in Afghanistan and other third world countries. Ashcroft declared,

"We are a nation called to defend freedom—a freedom that is not the grant of any government or document, but is our endowment from God."

The attorney general asserted that religion is the underpinning of all human culture. "Civilized people—Muslims, Christians and Jews—all understand that the source of freedom and human dignity is the Creator. Civilized people of all religious faiths are called to the defense of His creation," he declared.

He repeated the simple-minded dictum that the Bush administration's war on terrorism is a fight between good and evil. He sought to support this claim by quoting from the Bible, including the following passage from Deuteronomy 30:19: "I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live."

Ashcroft attempted to link the names of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, leaders of the American bourgeois democratic revolution, with the ideas of Christian fundamentalism. He even quoted the opening of the Declaration of Independence, which declares that men are "endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights," to suggest that the American Revolution was inspired by Christian fundamentalist principles.

However, the founders of the United States were opposed to the state sponsorship of religion. They were motivated in no small measure by the fact that state-enforced religion, far from fostering civilized relations, had provided the ideological grounds over the previous centuries for devastating wars and persecutions. Kings, princes and popes had sent millions to their deaths, from the Crusades to the Thirty Year War, on the basis of biblical citations.

Absolute monarchs, backed by church hierarchies, had justified their rule on the grounds that their power flowed from God's will. Early attempts at scientific investigation of man's place in the universe were suppressed.

The greatest leaders of the American Revolution recognized that the struggle against monarchy and despotism required a battle against the identification of the state with organized religion. The secularist viewpoint of the US founders reflected a long development of critical thought. The thinkers of the Enlightenment—Rousseau, Locke, Diderot and

others—challenged the concept that the political power of monarchs derived from the will of God. They made an attempt to analyze social and political relations from the standpoint of human reason, not revealed truth.

Locke's work is particularly well known. He ridiculed the concept of the divine right of kings. In its place he asserted the principle that governments derived their authority from the consent of the governed. Systems of laws, he said, were instituted for the purpose of advancing the common good. When a government abused its powers, the people had the right to change that government.

The revolt of the American colonies dealt an enormous blow to the ties between established religion and the state. While many people had come to America seeking religious freedom, the early colonies had established their own forms of religious tyranny. In pre-revolutionary America, "heresy" was a capital crime and individuals could be imprisoned for expressing differences over points of religious doctrine.

The influence of the Enlightenment helped foster a more tolerant attitude toward divergent religious viewpoints. By the mid-1700s, religious freedom had become a major issue.

The founders of the United States were hostile to attempts to legislate codes of thinking and personal conduct based on religious teachings. The American Revolution and its aftermath undermined the concept that there existed a "unitary set of values formulated by God and readily ascertainable by man" (*The Americanization of the Common Law*, William E. Nelson, University of Georgia Press, 1994, p. 115). In its place developed the view that the discovery of truth was a complex process involving the open clash of opposing ideas. Thus, society had no business attempting to impose one set of beliefs, religious or political, that all had to accept.

In the period following the American Revolution the prosecution of individuals for violations of a purely moral character declined. The principle that personal beliefs and personal ethics, so long as they did not harm others, were not to be dictated by the state, but reserved for the individual, became embedded in popular consciousness, marking a major advance in democratic rights.

Contrary to Ashcroft's claim that the United States was founded on Christian belief, Jefferson and a number of other founding founders were deists. Jefferson and James Madison, in particular, sought to embed the separation of church and state in the structure of the United States. The Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom, drafted by Jefferson in 1777, banned the state from any role whatsoever in religious affairs.

The statute declared, "No man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place or ministry whatsoever... [to] compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of [religious] opinions which he disbelieves is sinful and tyrannical." Jefferson rated the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom second only to his authorship of the Declaration of Independence in his list of

personal achievements.

James Madison in 1784 opposed an attempt by the Virginia legislature to levy a tax to support religious education. In his famous Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments he insisted that the principle of the separation of church and state was fundamental to democratic rights as a whole.

Madison wrote: "Either then, we must say, that the will of the Legislature is the only measure of their authority; and that in the plenitude of this authority, they may sweep away all our fundamental rights; or, that they are bound to leave this particular right untouched and sacred: Either we must say, that they may control the freedom of the press, may abolish the trial by jury, may swallow up the Executive and Judiciary Powers of the State; nay that they may despoil us of our very right of suffrage, and erect themselves into an independent and hereditary assembly: or we must say, that they have no authority to enact into law the Bill under consideration."

The secularization of government was considered so fundamental for democracy by the founders of the United States that the prohibition against the establishment of religion was incorporated into the first amendment to the US Constitution, drafted by Madison, which also guarantees freedom of speech, press and assembly.

By framing the right-wing policies of the Bush administration in terms of religion, Ashcroft seeks to develop, on reactionary foundations, a new ideological framework for unifying the population behind the policies of the US ruling elite. It is an attempt to mobilize ignorance and superstition in the service of American militarism.

Ashcroft's views lead toward the creation of an authoritarian state based on the establishment of some form of theocracy. The logic of his position is barely distinguishable from that of Christian Reconstructionism, a wing of the religious right that advocates "universal development of Biblical theocratic republics," based on Old Testament law (Christian Reconstructionism: Theocratic Dominionism Gains Influence, by Frederick Clarkson, part 1, www.publiceye.org). Non-Christian religions would be banned as idol worship, and so-called "immoral behavior" such as homosexuality and abortion would be outlawed. Adherents of this viewpoint call for Christians to "take back government from the state."

In summarizing the role of Ashcroft, it is worth recalling the words of Jefferson: "In every country and in every age, the priest has been hostile to liberty. He is always in alliance with the despot, abetting his abuses in return for protection to his own" (Thomas Jefferson to Horatio G. Spafford, 1814).



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