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The Manichaeism of Osama bin Laden and George W. Bush

Excerpts from a coming book by Dr. Tremblay entitled "Behind Bush's War."

By Rodrigue Tremblay, Ph.D.

"The most dangerous madmen are those created by religion, and people whose aim it is to disrupt society always know how to make good use of them."

—Denis Diderot (1713–1784)

President George W. Bush never hesitated to introduce religion and the dangerous notion of absolute virtue into American politics. When he was the governor of Texas, he had established an annual "Jesus Day" on June 10th.¹

In his public debates, he also exclaimed, "Jesus changed my heart!" And, once elected president, in January 2001, George W. Bush declared September 14 to be a national day of prayer.

Bush even opened his administration to a notorious representative of the American religious right: Attorney General John Ashcroft. Son and grandson of Protestant pastors, potentially a modern-day Torquemada,² Ashcroft declared to a group of students at the Bob Jones seminary, "We have no king but Jesus."³ All of these declarations and policies were in violation of a pluralist society's democratic principle of government neutrality in religious matters.

So it was no surprise after the September 11th attacks when George W. Bush, mirroring his antagonist bin Laden, said that Islamic terrorists and mass terrorism represented "Evil," implying that "Good" and virtue belonged to the United States, and promised to "rid the world of evil and terror."⁴ This followed a declaration in his "war whoop" speech to Congress on September 20, 2001, that "Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them." In other words, God is on our side (heard that before?).⁵

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George W. Bush has multiplied his sermonizing speeches and public prayers. An example of this was on March 30, 2002, when he declared in a radio broadcast: "We feel our reliance on the Creator who made us. We place our sorrows and cares before him, seeking God's mercy. We ask forgiveness for our failures, seeking the renewal He can bring."⁶

And he continued: "Faith brings confidence that failure is never final, and suffering is temporary, and the pains of the earth will be overcome. We can be confident, too, that evil may be present and it may be strong, but it will not prevail."⁷

And as if to underline the fact that he believed himself mandated by God to wage war, he added, "In this season, we are assured that history is of moral design. Justice and cruelty have always been at war, and God is not neutral between them. His purposes are often



Prof. Rodrigue Tremblay

defied, but never defeated."

Such religious messages from a head of state resemble what came out of the theocracies of Iran and of the Taliban government of Afghanistan, before it was deposed by a foreign army. Other than George W. Bush, I know of no other head of state of a democratic country,⁸ including Great Britain where there is a state religion, who prays in public and claims to act in the name of God.⁹

For people who are not American, hearing U.S. politicians close their speeches with the inevitable "God bless America" is quite startling. As a Belgian bishop remarked recently, such an incantation at the end of a political or military speech could really mean "God bless all of us, but not the others." Godfried Banneels, Archbishop of Malines-Bruxelles, noted that "it is not the first time in history that God has been recruited to favor one side, but it must be understood that this should not be done."¹⁰

But it is done in the United States. President George W. Bush goes even further: he begins his war council meetings with a prayer. When we realize that at these conclaves decisions are made to bomb thousands of people, one blanches at the thought that a president believes himself to be anointed by God to make war.¹¹ In the case of Bush, known for his jingoism, the mixture of religion and flagrant nationalism makes one ponder.

As reported by Bob Woodward, *The Washington Post's* veteran journalist, Bush doesn't hesitate to claim openly that he considers the United States to be above international law. In fact, during a meeting of his war council, on September 15, 2001, Bush is said to have declared the following, concerning the need for America to wage war against terrorism whatever others might say: "At some point, we may be the only ones left. That's okay with me. We are America."¹² Secretary of State Colin Powell is said to have remarked that talking big was no substitute for policy.

It is surprising that a country founded by people who wanted to escape the tyranny of the state religions which prevailed in 17th and 18th century Eu-

rope, today has leaders who want to establish Christianity as a state religion. In the past, empires called on the gods to confirm their supremacy. That the United States, the world's only military superpower at the beginning of the 21st century, seeks the same consecration is another indication that humanity's progress is very slow indeed. What is astonishing is that the Constitution formally forbids the government from taking a position on religious matters, nor may it declare what is good or bad according to a religious interpretation.¹³

What is the most disturbing for world stability is the American president's double penchant for things religious and for things military. The two together are dynamite. In a speech on April 8, 2002, in Knoxville, Tennessee, George W. Bush

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It is ironic that in their public declarations, it seems to be a contest to see who can be the most pious and mention Allah or God more often, George W. Bush, Osama bin Laden, or Saddam Hussein. Even though the Iraqi dictator is not really known for his piety, he resorts to references to Good and Evil to chastise the United States for its "policies of Evil," as he multiplies his incantations to Allah. In 2002, after having been plecticated at 100% by the Iraqi regime, Saddam Hussein declared, "The Iraqi question . . . is now the center of the battle between Good and Evil."¹⁴

In 1996, after his disastrous wars against Iran and Kuwait, Saddam Hussein decided to wage a political campaign with the theme of "faith" or "iman," discarding the secular model that he had espoused until then. He even ordered the construction of two new mosques in Baghdad, one of which is said to be named after himself.¹⁵

All three leaders—Bush, bin Laden, and Hussein—rely on absolute values with a religious connotation to consolidate their authority and to demonize their adversaries. It is perhaps understandable on the part of bin Laden, a medieval conception of Islam seeming to be the only ideal he has to offer the world. Even a sanguinary dictator like Hussein can be understood, if not condoned, for associating himself with religion and the deity to legitimate his position after having led his country to ruin.

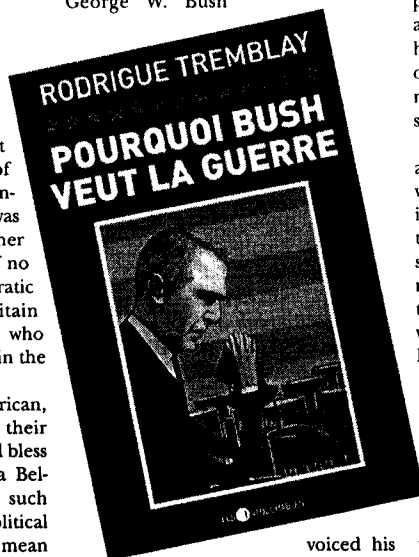
However, this shouldn't be the case in the United States, the historic example par excellence, along with France, of democracy and liberty. That George W. Bush is not able to articulate fundamental American values without losing himself in conjectures on Good and Evil is the tragedy for the United States, for the West, and for the world.

What the United States has to offer the world is not a sketchy medieval version of Good and Evil, but a system of fundamental political values that are based upon the rights of people to self-determination, to a democratic government and the rule of law, to inalienable human rights and individual freedom, to the respect for life, to tolerance, to the basic rights of freedom of thought, religion, and liberty of conscience, to free enterprise and economic progress through science, industry, and personal effort, and to the right of individuals to seek happiness.

All these values are rejected by Islam, but George W. Bush is incapable of explaining the contrast between the two civilizations, one founded upon a medieval and totalitarian religion, and the other on a modern and democratic humanism. On the contrary, he gets mired in a role that is not rightly his—that of Chief Theologian—when he takes it upon himself, as president, to judge the relative worth of different religions. For this is just what he did when he declared publicly that Islam is a religion "based on peace, love and compassion."¹⁶

When leaders succumb to a manichean classification of "Good" and

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voiced his vision of the relationship between his religious morality and American military power: "The best way to fight evil is to do some good. Let me qualify that—to the best way to fight evil at home is to do some good. The best way to fight them abroad is to unleash the military."

Around the same time, Bush's advisers released a political document announcing that the Administration was considering modifying the U.S. policy regarding the future use of nuclear weapons. Under certain circumstances, the old policy of deterrence or dissuasion—which stipulated that the U.S. would not be the first to use nuclear arms—could be replaced by the unilateral use of nuclear weapons.

People with a sectarian and ultra-religious morality are at risk of showing great cruelty toward people who do not think as they do. This is all the more possible if the others are of a different color, a different ethnicity, or a different religion. For my part, I don't think that Harry S. Truman, in 1945, would have dropped nuclear bombs on European cities, but he did bomb Asian cities.

Today, I do not think that George W. Bush would dare go after Europe. However, the Arab cities in the Middle East who oppose Israel have much to fear from a commander-in-chief who believes himself to be mandated by God to impose his version of justice. He would surely be able to find an excuse afterwards.

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"Evil," it is not only to demonize their enemy, although that can be a prerequisite before killing them or committing atrocities, but especially to assure themselves and their people that the enemy is 100% in the wrong and that they are 100% in the right.¹⁷

Osama bin Laden, leader of the al-Qaeda terrorist movement, could not be more clear: it is in the name of God (Allah) that he kills innocent victims. "These men (the September 11th hijackers) have realized that the only course to achieve justice and defeat injustice is through jihad (Muslim holy struggle) for the cause of God (Allah)."¹⁸

The language is practically identical to that used by George W. Bush after the September 11th attacks. It is a paradox of the 21st century that both Osama bin Laden and George W. Bush apply the same manichaeian terminology to describe themselves and their enemies. One seems to be a mirror image of the other. Both refer to Allah or God to justify their political actions. Both believe, or at least claim, that the Divinity is on their side; each thinks he is on the side of Good, while the other is automatically on the side of Evil.

For a manichaeian leader, debates and discussions are out. Any policy is justifiable, since the goal is to fight absolute Evil. It is all-out war, jihad, with the blessing of God or Allah. An ambitious leader can then put the frosting on the cake and announce that he was chosen by Allah or God to lead, and the circle is closed.

This is perhaps the fundamental reason for the fanaticism of manichaeian religions and why they have for so long been at the source of war. They tend to encourage blind obedience and primitive instincts, instead of reflection, study and dialogue. Whether it be in the Bible or in the Koran, there are many passages that justify violence.

The mix of religious Manichaeism and public affairs is always to be feared. It is wrong to think that religiously based terrorism is a kind of modern war of religions pitting Islam against Christianity, or against any other religion. It is rather the extreme reaction of some totalitarian and religious groups who are violently opposed to the humanist values of democracy, freedom, openness, tolerance, and the rule of law; that is to say, the values that have dominated in the West for three centuries and are the foundation of its progress.

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His book "Behind Bush's War" is soon to be published in the U.S.

Footnotes:

- 1 "Therefore, I, George W. Bush, Governor of Texas, do hereby proclaim June 10, 2000, "Jesus Day" in Texas and urge the appropriate recognition whereof, in official recognition whereof, I hereby affix my signature this 17th day of April 2000." George W. Bush, "Jesus Day" 2000 Proclamation day of prayer.
- 2 By virtue of the "Patriot Act," adopted in 2001, the Attorney General authorizes

the FBI to use wiretaps and other forms of electronic surveillance on citizens, even when they are not suspected of a crime.

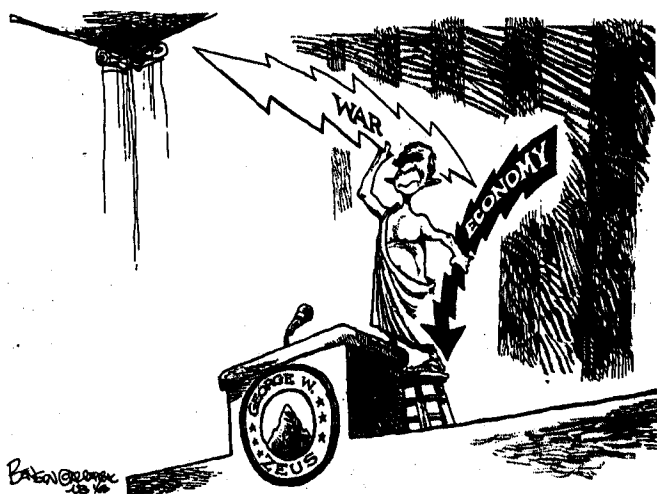
The best current example of government intrusion in personal privacy is the program of electronic surveillance proposed by the Department of Defense, at the Pentagon, to collect billions and billions of pieces of personal information on American citizens (phone calls, e-mails, credit card accounts, bank accounts, plane reservations, and many other sources of data), with the aim of detecting possible terrorist activities. This system, under the cover of the "Homeland Security Act" and called "Total Information Awareness," will use super computers to find specific information on particular individuals. See John Markoff, "Pentagon Plans a Computer System That would Peek at Personal Data of Americans," *The New York Times*, Nov. 9, 2002.

In George W. Bush's own words: "America is now a battlefield. There should be no doubt in anybody's mind that we must do everything we can to protect the homeland." See Mimi Hall, "Deal set on homeland department," *USA Today*, Nov. 13, 2002.

- 3 Jonathan E. Smaby, "American Ramadan," *The New York Times*, Nov. 18, 2001, p.WY13.
- 4 Paul Koring, "Bush pledges to conquer 'evil'," *The Globe & Mail*, Nov. 12, 2001, p.A4.
- 5 Bush was not the only one to put the United States on a pedestal of absolute moral purity. Rudolph Giuliani, the mayor of New York, echoed the words of the president, after September 11th: "On the one hand, you have democracy, the rule of law and the respect for human life; on the other hand, tyranny, arbitrary executions, and mass assassinations. We are Good; they are Evil. It's as simple as that." *The New York Times*, October 1, 2001.

Bush concluded his speech to the Congress, by saying, "May God grant us wisdom and may he watch over the United States of America." The American president, like many Americans, is close to thinking that God is an American, and that the United States was created by God. He came close to making such a solemn proclamation in 2001, when he declared "Our nation was chosen by God and mandated by history to serve (the world) as a model of justice." It seems that no side has a monopoly on narrowmindedness.

- 6 George W. Bush's chief speechwriter is Michael Gerson, an evangelistic Christian who studied theology at Wheaton College.
- 7 Radio speech by George W. Bush, on March 30, 2002. Elizabeth Bumiller, "Bush Strikes Religious Note in an Address for Holidays," *The New York Times*, March 31, 2002, p.21.
- 8 An exception could be Ariel Sharon, the Prime Minister of Israel. In his end-of-the-year message in 2001, he declared, "From Jerusalem, the eternal, undivided capital of the Jewish people for the last 3004 years and forever, I send you my warmest greetings for a happy, healthy and prosperous New Year . . . Israel is the only place in the world where Jews have the right, the capability and the duty to defend themselves by themselves. For this we must thank God every day . . . At this New Year, I fervently pray we will be blessed with security, peace and joy for all of us."
- 9 In Utah, there is a de facto state religion, the Mormon Church. Michael Janofsky, "Plaza Dispute in Salt Lake Roils Citizens Over Religion," *The New York Times*, Nov. 16, 2002.
- 10 Jean-Pierre Stroobants, "Le primat de Belgique en a assez du 'God Bless America'," *Le Monde*, Dec. 24, 2002.
- 11 Bob Woodward and Dan Blaz, "At Camp David, Advise and Dissent; Bush, Aides



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Grapple with War Plan," *The Washington Post*, Jan. 21, 2002, p. A01.

- 12 Bob Woodward, Op.cit.
- 13 The First Amendment reads: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;"
- 14 Jooneed Khan, "Les États-Unis reculent sur l'Irak," *La Presse*, October 18, 2002, p.A1.
- 15 John F. Burns, "Iraq Arms Quest uncovers a zest for Drink," *The New York Times*, Dec. 7, 2002.
- 16 David Waters, "Bush can't Begin to Judge Religion," *Scripps Howard News Ser-*

vice, Dec. 8, 2002.

- 17 Manichaeism was a religion founded by Mani (c.216-276), a Persian who thought the universe was simultaneously under the control of Good and Evil, but that one day these forces would be separated, each one in its own domain. This religion disappeared in the West in the 6th century, but survived in the Orient until the 14th century.
- 18 Statement attributed to Osama bin Laden. Associated Press, Salah Nasrawi, "Arab station airs tape with bin Laden reportedly naming all 911 hijackers," Sept. 11, 2002.

Messianic Complex? Bush in His Own Words

We do not claim to know all the ways of Providence. Yet we can trust in them, placing our confidence in the loving God behind all of life, and all of history. May he guide us now.

The liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world, it is God's gift to humanity.

—State of the Union Address, January 28, 2003

America believes deeply that everybody has worth, everybody matters, everybody was created by the Almighty.

—White House Remarks on AIDS proposal, Jan. 31, 2003

The same Creator who names the stars also knows the names of the seven souls we mourn today. The crew of the shuttle Columbia did not return safely to Earth; yet we pray that all are safely home.

—Remarks after the Columbia shuttle disaster, Feb. 1, 2003

It is fitting that, in the midst of tough times, that these two leaders [Joint Chief of Staff chair Gen. Richard Myers and CIA Director George Tenet] are sharing with scripture and prayer with the country.

Since we met last year, millions of Americans have been led to prayer. They have prayed for comfort in time of grief; for understanding in a time of anger; for protection in a time of uncertainty. Many, including me, have been on bended knee. The prayers of this nation are a part of the good that has come from the evil of September the 11th, . . .

I believe in prayer. I pray. I pray for strength, I pray for guidance, I pray for forgiveness. (Quoted by Knight-Ridder)

In this time of testing for our nation, my family and I have been blessed by the prayers of countless of

[sic] Americans. We have felt their sustaining power and we're incredibly grateful.

In this hour of our country's history, we stand in the need of prayer. . . . We pray for wisdom to know and do what is right and we pray for God's peace in the affairs of men. (Quoted by Associated Press)

—President's Remarks at National Prayer Breakfast, Washington, D.C., February 6, 2003 (All quotes from White House posted speech unless otherwise indicated.)

I welcome faith. I welcome faith to help solve the nation's deepest problems.

We're being challenged. We're meeting those challenges because of our faith. After we were attacked on September the 11th, we carried our grief to the Lord Almighty in prayer. The American people have deep and diverse religious beliefs, truly one of the great strengths of our country. And the faith of our citizens is seeing us through some demanding times. . . . We're meeting those challenges because of our faith.

In times of tragedy, faith assures us that death and suffering are not the final word. . . .

[America's enemies] hate the thought [that] . . . in this great country, we can worship the Almighty God the way we see fit.

Liberty is God's gift to every human being in the world.

—President's Remarks at National Religious Broadcasters convention, Nashville, Tenn., Feb. 10, 2003. Bush was introduced as "our friend and brother in Christ" and as someone who "unapologetically proclaims his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ" when he appeared at the broadcasters' convention, according to the *Washington Post* (Feb. 11, 2003).