

KINGDOM COME

By Michael Ventura

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The reader's letter was brief, just two sentences: "Would you have any thoughts on establishing or outlining guidelines for a platform of a Theocratic Party? An attractive one could rally the religious right, possibly to mass defection from the GOP."

I confess that my first response was: Why me? Why do I get letters like this? (I'm not sure I want to know the answer.) And yet ... the question is not as off-the-wall as it may seem. America had the Bible three centuries before it had the Constitution, and the first European colonies were emphatically theocratic: Rules of governance were determined by religious belief; heresy was punishable by exile and (in Salem) even death. As late as the Revolution (1776), it was a crime in most colonies to speak against the dominant religious creed. The Founders described themselves as religious, though most were notoriously unspecific about it. Jefferson said it was no concern of his whether his neighbor believed in no god, or one, or many: "It is in our lives and not our words that our religion must be read." But Jefferson did his own "edit" of the Gospels, cutting everything supernatural and retaining only Jesus' precepts for individual conduct, "the most benevolent and sublime ever taught." Starting in 1904, it became a tradition in the United States Senate to present a copy of "The Jefferson Bible" to every newly elected member.

But though America rejected theocracy (government based on religious belief) two centuries ago, the idea has hovered close by, especially lately. It's no news that for 25 years "the religious right" has used its considerable resources to create what would be, in effect, a new American theocracy; and since they now control the Republican Party, the push for a new theocracy is something Americans deal with politically every day.

Though this movement claims to be Christian (along with more than 90% of our population), the actual words of Jesus as preserved in the Gospels are rare in its rhetoric. Christian right-wingers tend to quote the letters of Paul, the Book of Revelation, and passages of the Old Testament, when they quote scripture at all, on the assumption that it's all divinely inspired by the same god. But if the great Jewish prophets, the writer of Revelation, Paul, and Jesus, all stood in front of you -- whom would you feel compelled to follow, if you called yourself a Christian? Wouldn't you have to accept Jesus' testimony before anyone else's? So, assuming that in America a successful theocratic party would have to be Christian, and quoting only from Jesus, and emphasizing that I haven't the courage to live up to most of what follows -- it may be instructive to ask: What might a New Theocratic Party platform look like on the various issues of today?

The bedrock platform: "One of their number tested him with this question: Master, which is the greatest commandment in the Law? He answered, Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind. That is the greatest commandment. It comes first. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. Everything in the Law and the prophets hangs on these two commandments." [Matthew 22:35-40] Jesus gives the same answer to a lawyer who asks the same question, and then the lawyer asks, "And who is my neighbor?" In answer Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, in which an injured Judean is aided by his ancestral enemy, a Samaritan. To be a good neighbor, Jesus says, "Go and do as he [the Samaritan] did."

[Luke 10:25-37] Jesus clinches his bedrock platform with: "This is my commandment, that you love each other as I loved you." [John 15:12]

On campaign finance reform: "You cannot serve God and Money." [Matthew 6:24]

On making a lot of money and getting lots of nice stuff: "None of you can be disciple of mine without parting with all his possessions." [Luke 14:33] "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." [Luke 18:25]

On crime and punishment: "You have learned that they were told, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But what I tell you is this: Do not set yourself against the man who wrongs you. If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer him your left." [Matthew 5:38-39] "When a man takes what is yours, do not demand it back." [Luke 6:30]

On lending and charity: "Give to everyone who asks you." [Luke 6:30] "And if you lend only where you expect to be repaid, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to each other to be repaid in full. But you must love your enemies and do good; and lend without expecting any return." [Luke 6:34-35]

On litigation and lawyers: "If a man wants to sue you for your shirt, let him have your coat as well." [Matthew 5:40] To several "lawyers" (most modern translations) or "scribes" (the King James), he said, "You shut the door of the kingdom of Heaven in men's faces; you do not enter yourselves, and when others are entering, you stop them." [Matthew 23:13]

On whether Bill Clinton should be forgiven: "If your brother wrongs you, reprove him; and if he repents, forgive him. Even if he wrongs you seven times in a day and comes back to you seven times saying, I am sorry, you are to forgive him." [Luke 17:3-4] "Pass no judgment, and you will not be judged. For as you judge others, so you will yourselves be judged, and whatever measure you deal to others will be dealt back to you." [Matthew 7:1-2]

On the importance of going to church: "When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; they love to say their prayers standing up in synagogue and at the street corners, for everyone to see them. I tell you this: They have their reward already. But when you pray, go into a room by yourself, shut the door, and pray to your Father who is there in the secret place." [Matthew 6:5-6]

On television preachers: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax gatherer. The Pharisee stood up and prayed thus: 'I thank thee, O God, that I m not like the rest of men, greedy, dishonest, adulterous; or, for that matter, like this tax gatherer ... But the other kept his distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven, but beat upon his breast, saying, O God, have mercy on me, sinner that I am. It was this man, I tell you, and not the other, who went home acquitted of his sins. For everyone who

exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." [Luke 18:9-14]

On government support for the arts: "Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils. Freely ye have received, freely give. Provide no gold, silver, or copper to fill your purse, no pack for the road, no second coat, no shoes, no stick; the worker earns his keep ... Look, I send you out like sheep among wolves; be wary as serpents, innocent as doves." [Matthew 10:8-16] (Yes, my application of this passage is a bit tongue in cheek -- but just a bit.)

On welfare and the homeless: "Then he will say to those at his left hand, Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire ... for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me. Then they also will answer, Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee? Then he will answer them, Truly I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it not to me." [Matthew 24:41-46]

On family values: "I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a son's wife against her mother-in-law; and a man will find his enemies under his own roof. No man is worthy of me who cares more for father or mother than for me; no man is worthy of me who cares more for son or daughter." [Matthew 10:34-37] "Do not call any man on earth father; for you have one Father, and he is in heaven." [Matthew 23:9]

On where the Kingdom of God really is: "You cannot tell by observation when the kingdom of God comes. There will be no saying, Look, here it is! or there it is!; for in fact the kingdom of God is within you." [Luke 17: 20-21]

Difficult and scary propositions when first uttered, they haven't gotten any easier with the passage of time. It's doubtful a New Theocratic Party would rally around them (at least, none ever has); but as Jesus said [Luke 6:46]: "Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and never do what I tell you?"

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