

AlbertMohler.com

The Clergy Leadership Network: The New Religious Left

George Orwell once described political language as words designed “to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.” Orwell’s comment comes immediately to mind when considering the formation of the new “Clergy Leadership Network,” a new group of liberal religious leaders who intend to become “the Christian Coalition of the left.” This group is likely to produce considerable wind in its arguments, if not in its sails.

Thursday, December 11, 2003

George Orwell once described political language as words designed “to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.” Orwell’s comment comes immediately to mind when considering the formation of the new “Clergy Leadership Network,” a new group of liberal religious leaders who intend to become “the Christian Coalition of the left.” This group is likely to produce considerable wind in its arguments, if not in its sails.

The Clergy Leadership Network announced its formation on November 21, promising to bring “sweeping changes—changes in our nation’s political leadership and changes in failing public policies.” According to The New York Times, the CLN “will operate from an expressly religious, expressly partisan point of view.” And that point of view is decidedly liberal.

The new group’s chief executive officer is the Reverend Albert M. Pennybacker of Lexington, Kentucky. According to Pennybacker: “The Christian Right has been very articulate, but they have been exclusive and very judgmental of anyone who doesn’t agree with them. People may want to label us the Christian Left. But what we really are about is mainstream issues and truth, and if that makes us left then that shines even more light on the need for a shift in our society.”

With that kind of drivel coming from the top, this group is not likely to pose much of a threat. A general rule to follow in politics is this: When a group starts complaining that the opposition is “very judgmental,” just wait for a torrent of judgmentalism to follow. The group’s new web site features diatribes against the policies of the Bush Administration and warns of ominous consequences if liberal citizens do not rally to their call, organize politically, and retake the national initiative.

The Clergy Leadership Network intends to “identify clergy across the nation who are willing to be active in our goal of leadership change.” According to The New York Times, the CLN “will be the first national liberal religious group ...whose primary focus is electoral politics and partisan political organizing.”

Their aims are clearly political. An introductory statement on the group’s web site declares: “We will lead our religious communities to embrace political participation as a spiritual expression. With full respect for constitutional restraints, we will guide our religious communities toward fair and positive involvement in election awareness and activity.” A review of the group’s political agenda reveals a laundry list of liberal policies and goals couched in ambiguous language. [See CLN web site]

For leadership, the group has turned to a virtual who’s who of liberal religious leaders—many deeply rooted in the protest movements of the sixties. Albert Pennybacker is a former associate general secretary of the National Council of Churches and former president of the left-wing Interfaith Alliance. He is well known as one of the leading bureaucrats of

liberal Protestantism. Joining Pennybacker in the leadership of the group is a twenty-four member national committee that includes some of the best known liberal leaders of the last thirty years.

Perhaps the most notorious name on the list is William Sloan Coffin, a retired minister and one time pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City, as well as chaplain at Yale University. In a recent book of essays, *The Heart is Little to the Left*, Coffin argued for a platform of liberal causes and denied that the Bible should set our moral agenda. He criticizes those who affirm biblical inerrancy and infallibility as fundamentalists who “sacrifice intellect, emotion, and the honesty of both to the safety of their literal creed.” These conservative believers “don’t appreciate the importance of religious myths, which are spiritual truths, not historical facts.” According to Coffin, the Bible is filled with stories “that are not literally, only eternally true.” The cute turn of a phrase cannot hide the fact that Coffin is redefining truth as something less than true.

According to Coffin, “the Bible is not infallible in matters scientific, historical, or even as regards ethical norms of behavior.” Don’t take the miracles too seriously either. For, “if Jesus never walked on the Sea of Galilee, he is still to Christians their Messiah.”

Having declared the Bible to be an insufficient guide on matters of morality, Coffin also attacks the “homophobia” that marks conservative Christianity. He asserts that the biblical material dealing with homosexuality is reducible to “only” seven verses, even as he acknowledges that each of these verses presents a negative verdict on homosexuality. He asserts, however, that the biblical authors were locked in their own prejudices and ignorance. The Apostle Paul revealed his ignorance by thinking that “all men were straight.” According to Coffin, “He knew nothing of sexual orientation. He assumed that all homosexual activity was done by heterosexuals.” Therefore, “all the biblical passages used to flay gays and lesbians have really nothing whatsoever to say about constitutionally gay people in genuinely loving relationships.”

Be sure you understand that argument clearly. In this case, Coffin is simply repeating the nonsense that passes for a serious exegetical and theological argument on the theological left. They must concede that the Bible presents a uniform condemnation of homosexuality, so they just claim that the biblical authors misunderstood the whole issue—completely missing the fact that many people are simply born this way and would thus sin not to follow the sexual inclinations of their own “orientation.” Accordingly, we cannot accept the Bible word for word, “for everything biblical is not Christlike.”

William Sloan Coffin is a true icon of religious liberalism, having championed virtually every leftist cause of the last half-century. In establishing the Clergy Leadership Network, this group of aging lions of the left wants to reassert liberal ideology in the name of organized religion and to reinvigorate liberal Christianity as a potent force in post-modern America. Conservatives need not worry.

The Clergy Leadership Network’s insurmountable challenge is clear—there is so little credibility left in the declining precincts of liberal Protestantism that prospects for revitalized assertiveness appear foolish. Time and time again, similar groups have been established and most are now long forgotten.

The CLN’s leadership claims that Christian conservatives are overly obsessed with hot-button moral issues such as abortion and homosexuality. Nevertheless, this is hard to take when a quick review of the membership on the CLN leadership roster includes persons who have been vociferous advocates for the homosexual movement and stalwart defenders of legalized abortion. Who’s obsessed?

Let’s take a closer look at the CLN roster. One of the group’s national committee members, George Regas, is an Episcopal priest who was one of the founders of a similar organization known as “the Progressive Religious Partnership.” According to Baptist Press, Regas’s position on abortion is extreme by any measure. Regan once preached a sermon at a PRP event arguing: “Many people accept the legality of abortion, but we must move beyond this and affirm its moral legitimacy. A woman can chose to terminate a pregnancy and be a holy and righteous person.... This God given freedom to choose is what it means to be a human being. To force the unwanted on the unwilling, to coerce a woman to use her body against her will in choice, is a kind of legalized rape—and it is morally repugnant.” [See Baptist Press coverage]

Other members of the CLN national committee include Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg, a former moderator of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations; Reverend Dr. Joan Brown Campbell, former general secretary of the National Council of Churches; the Reverend Dr. Michael Kinnamon, a former administrator of the World Council of Churches; and

Reverend Dr. Paul H. Sherry, former president of the United Church of Christ.

Several figures once identified with the Southern Baptist Convention also appear on the list. James M. Dunn, former executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee of Public Affairs is joined by Robert L. Maddux, a former Carter administration official who currently serves with the District of Columbia Baptist Convention. Also listed as a member of the national committee is Jimmy R. Allen, former pastor of the First Baptist Church of San Antonio, Texas and former president of the Southern Baptist Convention. Allen was the last SBC president elected before the “conservative resurgence” of the last twenty-five years changed the shape of the Southern Baptist Convention. The fact that these men would rather stand with William Sloan Coffin than the current SBC leadership says a great deal about why the conservative redirection of the denomination was so urgently needed.

The Clergy Leadership Network is not limited to Christian clergy. The group hopes to recruit pastors, rabbis, and imams, as well as others committed to these liberal causes. “We invite clergy from throughout the country to join us. We offer an avenue of action focused on the 2004 elections that can impact positively the direction of the nation and the leadership we choose.” Given legal restrictions, the group will not formally endorse candidates, but you can bet your draft card that “the leadership we choose” will not be the Bush-Cheney ticket.

Journalist-historian Theodore H. White once described a liberal as “a person who believes that water can be made to run uphill.” That describes this new group perfectly. Their goal of resurrecting and reinvigorating liberal Protestantism and an ecumenical phalanx of religious progressives will be an uphill battle all the way. They are still living in the sixties, looking for the next sit-in and reciting the old liberal creeds. The Clergy Leadership Network will be interesting to watch –but nothing to fear.

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

