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A table of contents for *Anvil* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_anvil_01.php

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Confessing Christ in the 'War on Terror'

In this article Michael Northcott reflects on Christian witness in Uganda under Amin and considers contemporary attitudes in American cultural Christianity which have been drawn in to support the war on terrorism and the war in Iraq. He challenges evangelicals who do not think beyond applauding George W Bush because he goes to church and asks whether we really confess Christ and are prepared to suffer for justice.

Confessing Christ under Amin

I once had the privilege of meeting Janani Luwum who was later, as Archbishop of Central Africa under the tyranny of Idi Amin, to become one of the twentieth century church's martyrs. During his theological studies in Canterbury and London in the 1960s, Luwum often preached at the parish of St Mary's Shortlands in Kent where I sang in the choir and which had a link (through the Church Missionary Society) with his Diocese of Northern Uganda. On returning to Uganda, Luwum, a natural leader, was appointed Bishop of Northern Uganda in 1969, at a service attended by the then Army Chief of Staff, Idi Amin. Two years later, Idi Amin overthrew the government of President Milton Obote in an armed coup and inaugurated a vicious reign of terror in Uganda. This saw many Christians kidnapped, tortured and killed by his regime, as well as the forced expulsion of 55,000 Asian Ugandans. During Amin's reign of terror, Luwum was a frequent critic of the government, and in 1974 was appointed Archbishop of the Province of Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Zaire. Luwum often went personally to the feared State Research Bureau to secure the release of prisoners, and he and his fellow bishops sought meetings with Amin to protest the killings and other excesses of his regime. Eventually Amin had Luwum and six other bishops arraigned in a show trial at which they were falsely accused, and found guilty, of smuggling arms. Luwum was taken away from court and secretly but summarily shot that same night for resisting Amin's tyranny. Within a year, the Church in Uganda proclaimed Luwum a martyr, and many returned to the faith because of his example of courage in the face of the fierce persecution of the church by Amin.¹

In 2003, the commemoration of Janani Luwum as Saint and Martyr was formally recognised by the Episcopal Church of the United States of America in its liturgical calendar. I write this paper in the week in which the parish of Holy

1 See further 'Janani Luwum, Archbishop of Uganda and Martyr (16 February 1977)' by James Kiefer at http://www.satucket.com/lectionary/janani_luwum.htm 14 February 2005.

Family Chapel Hill, North Carolina (where I am worshipping on sabbatical at Duke University) recalls his martyrdom, on February 16th 1977, at a Eucharist presided over by his successor as Bishop of Northern Uganda, the Rt. Rev. Benoni Ogwal-Abwang. The blood of the martyrs is said to be the seed of the church. In every age where the church is persecuted and Christians put their lives on the line for the gospel, Christians are reminded that their vocation is to follow Christ in the way of the cross and not to rule the world.

Confessing Christ under Bush

Christians in the United States are divided in their response to the imperial rule of the administration of President George W. Bush. While none of them will be martyred for criticising him, many believe that the 'war on terror' seriously compromises Christianity in America. Since the September 11 2001 attack on America, many hundreds of residents on American soil, and many individuals around the world, have disappeared into various extra-judicial places of incarceration and torture which the Bush administration has used or established in the course of its declared 'war on terror'. They are often held indefinitely and incommunicado, in degrading and inhuman conditions, and they have often been systematically tortured, and in some cases killed. Christians and others who are critical of the 'war on terror' view the extra-judicial actions of the Bush administration as verging on tyranny. They are also deeply disturbed by Bush's frequent resort to Christian language to legitimate and veil the judicial abuses and militarist adventurism inaugurated under the aegis of the 'war on terror'.

In the same week in 2004 in which the Iraq survey group reported its unequivocal failure to find any weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (challenging the whole basis on which Britain joined with the United States in this conflict), a group of theologians signed a statement, 'Confessing Christ in a World of Violence'. In this they publicly sought to dissociate Christians from the violent and imperial overtones of the theology of war 'emanating from the highest circles in the US government' and 'seeping into the churches'.² They suggest that American churches have been largely complicit in the language of the war on terror and in the idealisation of the United States as a 'righteous empire' that has taken up the task of 'ridding the world of evil'. Against the imperial and nationalist discourse of the 'war on terror' they argue that Christians must reaffirm that Jesus Christ knows no national boundaries, that Christ commits Christians to a strong presumption against war, and that a strategy to defeat terrorism should never take precedence over ethical and legal presumptions against such practices as torture and the killing of civilians by the indiscriminate use of weapons of mass destruction. Above all, they reject the false teaching that America is a Christian nation standing over against non-Christian adversaries. Against the use of religious language by Bush and his speech-writers to justify the actions of an imperial America in the war on terror, the authors of this confessional document point to the Lordship of Christ which cannot be set aside by any earthly power. Against the demonization as 'evil-

2 'Confessing Christ in a World of Violence' was published in full by *Sojourners* and can still be viewed at http://www.soj.net/index.cfm?action=action.election&item=confession_signers, 14 February 2005.

doers' of those who question or violently resist American policies, they set Christ's commendation of enemy-love in the gospels, and they see peacemaking, not empire-building, as the central vocation of Christians in a troubled world.

The document's title – 'Confessing Christ in a world of violence' – is a reminder of the resistance of the Confessing Church in Germany to the annexation of the German Lutheran Church to the Nazi cause, and of the abuse of the Scriptures, and Church order, by Christian supporters of apartheid in South Africa. It is also reminiscent of Luwum's call for Christians in Uganda to resist the 'powers of darkness' under the tyranny of Amin. Its authors are saying that to confess Christ in relation to the 'war on terror' is more than just to dispute the use of the metaphor 'war on terror'; it is to challenge the imperial and monarchic abuses of power by the Bush administration in its reaction to the attacks on America in 2001 and in its theology of war. For its authors and signatories the discourse and practices of the 'war on terror', and the demonization of all who dare to resist the power of the West, present Christians with a serious confessional issue, one which requires them publicly to dissent and resist.

George Bush's religious rhetoric

The language of righteous empire is just part of an extensive array of religious imagery and reference that George W. Bush, like most of his predecessors in the White House, regularly includes in his speeches and public addresses, aided by his speech writer, Wheaton College graduate, Michael Gerson. Gerson, in a recent public lecture, argues that while he frequently uses the theme of the guiding hand of providence in his speeches there is an important theological principle at stake. This is 'to avoid identifying the purposes of an individual or a nation with the purposes of God. That seems presumption to me, and we've done our best to avoid the temptation'.³ However, in reality this temptation is one that Gerson and Bush have often embraced, right from the first inaugural where Gerson has Bush declare that Jesus Christ, whom Christians acknowledge as the one who 'fill(s) time and eternity with his purpose', is the *author* of the story of the United States of America in its battles against tyranny and for 'freedom'.⁴ This is a claim repeated in the second inaugural address where Bush took as his main theme the defeat of tyranny in Iraq and elsewhere, and the advance of 'freedom' and other American values. These, Bush claims, remain the same 'yesterday, today and forever'. Again the derivation is crystal clear to his Christian hearers and the theological implication is again troubling. Words used to speak of the eternal and unchanging character of Jesus Christ after his ascension to the right hand of God are used in Bush's second inaugural to add shine to the longevity of the Bush administration and to the claim that its militaristic assertion of American power is for the purpose of upholding 'American values', seen as Christian in origin and unchanging just as Jesus Christ remains the same yesterday, today and forever.

3 Michael Gerson, 'The Danger for America is Not Theocracy', Address at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, Key West, Florida (December 2004) at www.beliefnet.com/story/159/story_15943_1.html, February 12, 2005.

4 See Michael Northcott, 'An Angel Directs the Storm': The Religious Politics of American Neoconservatism', *Political Theology* 5 (2004), pp 137-56.

Gerson argues that his and Bush's use of Christian and Trinitarian language is not novel. He cites a speech of Roosevelt at the commencement of America's entry into World War II in which he contrasted the 'cross of mercy' with the German swastika.⁵ Gerson also argues that the use of religious language in political speeches is important because of the moral dimension which it adds to politics. Religion, and Christianity in particular, provides 'a standard of values that stands above the political order' and is a vital source of an objective standard of social justice from which the condition of a society may be judged. However, far from enabling the Bush administration to stand under the higher judgement of Biblical standards of justice and righteous government, Bush and Gerson use Christian language to add a messianic dimension to the 'war on terror', and to the imperial designs which lie, only thinly veiled, beneath the claim that it is a defensive war.

America's destiny

As I have shown at greater length elsewhere, this messianic gloss on American imperialism and its 'manifest destiny' to dominate the Western hemisphere, is rooted in the religious languages and traditions of the seventeenth-century Pilgrim Fathers. They saw their inheritance of the 'new world' as fulfilment of millennialist beliefs that God would establish a 'new heaven and a new earth' before the end of time, and that this end time was presaged by the founding of America.⁶ It is such post-millennialist belief which explains the Wilsonian adventurism of the early and mid-twentieth century in American foreign policy and the gradual expansion of American military power to encompass the globe. It is to this tradition of manifest destiny that Bush and Gerson frequently allude in their claim that freedom is expanding and tyranny being turned away by the war on terror. However, many of Bush's most ardent evangelical Christian supporters – those who regard Bush as God's representative in the White House – are no longer post-millennialist in outlook. Instead they have embraced the more pessimistic creed of dispensationalist pre-millennialism. This believes that the world is embroiled in a downward spiral of evil and wickedness which presages the eventual rule of the antichrist and the rapture of Christians from the time of tribulation which will engulf the world before the end. According to this creed, the crucial end-time events involve the re-establishment of the Jewish Temple on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and a massive and violent conflagration in the Middle East. Between them these two millennialist ideologies fuel a dangerous mix of American imperialism and expansionist nationalism which Christians in America have too little resisted. And perhaps it is the absence of consistent theological criticism of the messianism of Bush, rather than the appearance of the occasional missive by theologians denouncing him, which really needs investigation and explanation.

American civil religion

I suggest in *An Angel Directs the Storm* that the reason most American Christians, especially those of a conservative evangelical hue, have not perceived the blasphemous and idolatrous dimensions of Bush's political theology and the

5 Gerson, 'The Danger for America'.

6 See further Michael Northcott, *An Angel Directs the Storm: Apocalyptic Religion and American Empire*, I. B. Tauris, London 2004.

tyrannical implications of his administration's policies, is the combination of the privatisation of American Christianity with the dominance in the public realm of American civil religion. American civil religion involves a widespread cult of the flag before which schoolchildren enact a daily ritual of allegiance and which acts as a totemic symbol for all Americans. The cult of the flag is combined with a widespread belief in the necessity of blood sacrifice for the maintenance of the freedoms and union of states which the flag symbolises. In a powerful work of ethnographic analysis, Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle argue that America's civil religion is a totemic sacrificial system which involves regular militarised conflict and death.⁷ Their analysis explains why it is that every death of a soldier in the Iraq war – as in the Vietnam and Korean wars which preceded it – is lauded in public with the language of sacrifice. Such language is mobilised as frequently by the wives of serving soldiers who are threatened with death, or who have died, as it is by the President and the Secretary of State. In the religion of America, the necessity of blood sacrifice and of redemptive violence is central, just as redemptive violence is at the heart of America's story about itself, from the American Revolution and the Civil War to the Vietnam War and now the 'war on terror'.

This nationalistic embrace of the myth of redemptive violence is combined with the privatisation of religion in America. This confines religious belief and affection to the inner world of religious experience and piety and formally excludes it from the public square. It is this combination which deprives mainstream American Christianity of the self-critique which would enable the proper prophetic criticism of civil religion and its use by the Bush administration to legitimate its abuses of power and its theology of war. As Stanley Hauerwas argues, the problem with Bush's sacralisation of the American account of freedom is precisely that it is imperial in its demands on the Christian. It demands that Christians submit their bodies to the imperative of the flag, and allow their (or their children's) blood to be spilt in America's imperial wars. This demand is in conflict with the Christian claim that the sacrifice of Christ was a sacrifice that put an end for ever to the need for blood sacrifice. It is equally in conflict with the form of service, the kind of freedom, that is the shape of the new life made possible in God's kingdom.⁸

Learning from Luwum

The recent American Episcopal Church's recognition of the martyrdom of Archbishop Luwum is timely in the context of the Christian language with which Bush masks his imperial 'war on terror'. Luwum was a martyr who resisted tyranny without fanfare and who quietly warned that the Church should not conform to 'the powers of darkness'. In recalling his courageous witness against state terrorism, Christians remember that Luwum, like Christ himself, did not fight violence with violence, and made peace with the ultimate tyranny of sin and death by the cross, an instrument of imperial torture. Most of those whom the Bush administration has illegally incarcerated and tortured in its war on terror have been Muslim and

7 Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999.

8 Stanley Hauerwas, 'Interview with Stanley Hauerwas', 8 November 2001 cited Northcott, *Angel Directs*, p 139.

not Christian. Islam too has a tradition of martyrdom which ultimately derives from its Christian origins, and which in recent years has been perverted by Muslim extremists into a perverted instrument of suicidal warfare. It is a tragic irony that Christian theological language should be used to justify the imperial creation of so many Islamic martyrs in the putative defence of American freedom. Luwum's witness reminds Christians that the Christian hope for freedom from tyranny cannot be achieved behind the barrel of a gun or with the aid of cluster bombs or torture. Quiet and consistent witness to the Lordship of Christ above all other claims to authority, and neighbourly care for the victims of those whom worldly power abuses and marginalises – these are the forms of political theology that truly witness to the Lordship of Christ in a world which still awaits his final revealing.

The Rev Dr Michael Northcott is Reader in Christian Ethics at the University of Edinburgh. His recent book *An Angel Directs the Storm: Apocalyptic Religion and American Empire* (I.B. Tauris, 2004) studies the issues addressed here more fully.