

# PIETY IN THE BUNKER

Religiosity is the last refuge of impeachable Presidents

ANDREW CARNEGIE: *This is Christian country.*

MARK TWAIN: *Why, Carnegie, so is hell. But we don't brag of this.*

THIS NATION IS GOD'S NATION. The Office of the President of the United States is, therefore, sacred." That is the gospel of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon. When Nixon, playing Mr. Bones to Mr. Moon, came out of the White House last December 13 to greet his disciples of the Freedom Leadership Foundation, they knelt down to worship him. That was as good an indication as we needed at the time of Mr. Nixon's desperation. Only the idolaters were left in his retinue. When a man has sacrificed all honor, he must settle for adoration. The poor Roman emperors had no way left to get their fellows' attention but to make themselves gods.

Nothing crazier could have been imagined than for Richard Nixon—the voice of the South and the Bible Belt, of Middle American Protestantism, of antipornography law-and-order—to be incensed by an Oriental power; unless it were for him to trot out a Jesuit casuist to justify these ceremonies. Back in 1960, the Reverend Norman Vincent Peale endorsed Richard Nixon in order to keep Mr. Kennedy and John XXIII out of the White House. And even this summer some regions of the dark outback called the attempted impeachment of Nixon a Catholic plot (just look at those weird Italian names—Rodino! Sirica!). Meanwhile, Nixon, digging in for the last assault, drew his Catholic Mafia close around him—General Haig, more fierce in piety than his Jesuit brother; Pat Buchanan and Rose Mary

Woods; Robert Abplanalp (a Villanova product). The Christian Scientists banished or jailed, only the Catholics were left inside to encourage outside fanatics like Sun Moon and Rabbi Korff.

Dr. Johnson said patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels. That's wrong. Religion is. It perfectly fit Nixon's hope that we would not notice him, so awed were we to be by his office. He was serving, by saving, the Presidency—as his flunkies burgled and lied, in 1972, to reelect the President. There is a double withdrawal—from the Presidency to any one particular President, and from "the President" to mere Richard Nixon. Nixon was an admittedly unworthy upholder of his position's majesty—which is just the approach that allows any Pope to combine personal humility and institutional grandeur. The theological formula is *ex opere operato*—that is, sacramental miracles are wrought "by the efficiency of the ceremony itself"—not, in the first place, *ex opere operantis*, "by the efficiency of the celebrant." So we are to forget the lecher inside the confessional box, or the drunkard at the altar—forget the man, and think only of his vestments, the insignia, the paraphernalia of office. Mr. Nixon was a mere appendage to the *Spirit of '76*, and we must bend our knees to It, no matter who its occupant might be. Nixon presided over his own Presidency as its liturgist. And this plainest of men made it the gaudiest of principalities. When seized with self-doubt, he so-laced himself with palaces.

Yet, even as the priest-king, he had to settle for a sorry crew of diviners and haruspices. He had a millionaire valet—but it was just

Bebe. He had a slick White House chaplain—who is his own order's pariah. He was worshiped—but by a corrupt Korean regime's least honorable extension. And he had a rabbi who cast himself as a stand-in for all our dead ex-Presidents. There is something very sad about such large claims when they come marched out by such a crew of moral dwarfs.

## The Reverend Moon

IN HIS DEMONSTRATIONS and lobbyings, this right-wing version of Maharaj Ji used the motto "God loves Richard Nixon." That could be a deep theological statement, an attempt to provoke God into theodicy. The Lord boasted to Job about Behemoth and Leviathan, like a parent proud of even ill-favored children. But he must be tempted to hide Nixon somewhere in the last row when trying to explain his universe. Yet Mr. Moon did not mean it that way—he obviously considered Mr. Nixon one of God's better strokes, a thing to boast of. Isn't he powerful? He leads the world's greatest empire. What further sign do we need of the heavenly favor?

Caliban said that his colonizers had taught him a language in which he could curse them. We taught Sun Moon a religious vocabulary in which to bless us—but his blessings are a curse. We taught him that God loves a succeder—not like that prodigal Son of his who went off and got crucified and had to be dis-

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owned. True, the crucified later got impaled on gold instruments of torture, to bleed rubies—and then he was let back into the family. But on terms.

That is the religion we taught our subject colonies, and Moon comes innocently to remind us of it, and get paid. Make a buck for God. How many guns does the Pope have? Not many—not nearly as many as Mr. Nixon had. So Nixon was our Pope. The great Korean succeder, reported to be worth \$10 million, comes to his mother country (the colonizing one) to show us he has built a better churchmouse-trap. Once emperors become gods, the empire sends back from its fringes rather embarrassing forms of cult offering. The surprising thing is that mainline Protestants go along with this Oriental cult. Or perhaps it is not so surprising. All absolutisms in ruin tend to lean upon each other. God as a daddy with some power left to spank has gone into hiding, and only the nuclear hickory stick looks credible still. In that sense, Nixon did more to bail out God than vice versa.

The trading of absolutisms was something we became familiar with in the Fifties, when there were so many converters from Communism to Christ. Even Whittaker Chambers gave up one faith to embrace Richard Nixon and Christianity. The Colsons of this world have just gone one step farther, giving up even Nixon for Christ. But far more try to cling to both at the same time—and even tend to mix them up. Even a rabbi like Baruch Korff compared Nixon to a Christ betrayed by Judases of the media.

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Baruch Korff

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A FEW MONTHS AGO, the front pages of our newspapers showed Mr. Nixon accepting, with a rather apprehensive look, a very slim volume of his praises from an inveterate self-praiser named Korff. The President had good reason for uneasiness—Korff had, among other things, just tried to incite the Vice-President of the United States to disobey the Constitution. But if Nixon was not going to take his book from this source, where else could he look?

You may have noticed that Mr. Nixon's grand reign produced no celebratory literary work. This was

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not for lack of trying. Early in Nixon's reign, a *Time* reporter sent me an interoffice memo from Washington which said there was a hunt on for an official biographer. There was reason to hope, at that point, for someone respectable, which ruled out some of the obvious hacks who had written about him before. I later asked Pat Buchanan if the hunt had been successful, and he said it had: Jeffrey Hart, a *National Review* editor, had been anointed and had gone to work. The plan was for the book to be ready by the 1972 election, but Hart told me his publishers had some objection to his first manuscript. (He was pretending that the book was not authorized.) Then James Buckley, *National Review's* candidate for anything, came out for Mr. Nixon's resignation. The book is not expected to appear. So Nixon, who turned down the hacks, had to settle for a kook named Korff.

Rabbi Korff's religion seems to be Rabbi Korff, so maybe he does not belong in this survey. He presents himself as filling in for all the ex-Presidents who died recently and could not come to their successor's defense. When Gerald Ford did not accept this plan—which called for Ford to refuse the Presidency should Nixon be impeached—Korff decided Ford was equivocal: "I am not afraid to make categorical statements, unlike the Vice-President." The Rabbi not only refuses to take oaths himself; he thought the only categorical act for Ford was to break his oath to the Constitution.

When not egging on Mr. Ford, the Rabbi elicited mumbles of agreement from Nixon. Isn't George Meany the "archdeacon of impeachment"? Well, sort of. Wasn't John Ehrlichman's conviction a "blot on justice"? Korff said the President did not disagree. Indeed, the President went farther than his imp of suggestion on this one, adding that it would be hard for anyone to get a fair trial in Washington. When Kingman Brewster said blacks could not get a fair trial in New Haven, Spiro Agnew treated that as an attack on our whole system of justice.

Rabbi Korff thinks very well of himself and Mr. Nixon, but not so well of the press or of women. He boasts of his conquests to Sally Quinn, telling her that his wife—a quarter of a century younger than he is—has good reason to fear his

"digressions." But women should be kept in their place, so men can be "aggressive and domineering." Sons, he added, should never "see their fathers yield to their mothers." His swagger is paired with a cringe, forging a link between him and the resentful client: "The entire administration is held captive by the *Washington Post*. . . I feel like I am in Hanoi and not in Washington." Both Korff and the President are martyrs to their religion, which is their selves. The Rabbi feels Mr. Nixon would not indulge in racial epithets—not that it would make any difference if he did: "Frankly, I have referred to my friends as that *goy* or that *shiksa*." We are not told what these acquaintances call the Rabbi.

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John McLaughlin, S.J.

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FATHER MC LAUGHLIN is a displaced parson. He was not part of the Catholic old guard at the White House—he began to see the ex-President about the same time, and for the same reason, that Korff saw him. McLaughlin is not even part of the new Catholic majority Nixon tried to create in response to Kevin Phillips' ethnic Republican theology. Pat Buchanan, who is at least a bright defender of his favorite crook, called Michael Novak to the White House in 1972 to fish for the new ethnics.

Father McLaughlin does not speak for this constituency. With his superficial Eastern overlay of sophistication, he is a throwback to the higher Bing Crosbyism of the Fifties. The first tactic of Catholics wanting to "belong" as Americans was to croon and join the country club. But by the Fifties John Courtney Murray had polished this act to a subtler shine. He presided at Henry Luce symposia as a clerical Robert Hutchins. His type largely disappeared with the fall of Camelot, but it obviously shaped Father McLaughlin's ideals. He aspired to be a with-it "media priest"—even though he still has not learned that the noun "media" is plural; he keeps informing us on TV that the media *is* evil. He also became an instant expert on impeachment law, quoting with great approval the Yale professor whose name he still mispronounces (*Bick-el*). Names trouble him—a real trial for a name-dropper.

His religious superior made an ill-advised attempt to recall Father Mc-

Laughlin after the White House priest had canonized the Nixon of the transcripts. This was taken as a political punishment, though I am told that the real objection was religious: Father McLaughlin, a man who took a vow of strict obedience to religious authority, had told an audience that he was responsible to only one man on earth—Richard Nixon. McLaughlin weathered his recall by pointing to activist Jesuits like Robert Drinan and Daniel Berrigan. The comparison does him no honor. When Cardinal Spellman pressured the Jesuit provincial into banishing Berrigan in the Sixties, Father Dan obeyed and went off to Mexico. Besides, both Drinan and Berrigan have stayed on good terms with their superiors, getting approval for their mode of life, which is not extravagant or secular. By contrast, the provincial who gave McLaughlin permission to go to the White House, and the one who later tried to recall him, have both said that he misled them. McLaughlin's sense of duty seemed engaged by nothing higher than the preservation of Richard Nixon at any cost. His theology of therapy concluded that the President should blow off steam by encouraging young aides to think through the logistics of paying hush money. Older-style moralists would call that offering "an occasion of sin." And the arguments used by McLaughlin proved too much for even William Buckley to abide, prompting one of that columnist's rare moments of outrage over Watergate: "Did he [Nixon] believe that a paid consultant wearing a Roman collar could transubstantiate the tapes from barracks-room discussions about how to lay the Statue of Liberty into sacrosanct deliberations of a man identified by Father McLaughlin as 'the greatest moral leader of the last third of this century'?"

The Buckley outburst, when it came, was a honey: "Either Mr. Nixon believes what Fr. McLaughlin says, in which case he has completely lost touch with reality; or else he doesn't believe it, but he thinks it will work, in which case he has completely lost touch with reality." What prompted Mr. Buckley's anger is the concept, now related to the witness of Thomas à Becket, of "the honor of God." And perhaps the last, best reason for impeaching the President would have been to save God's hon-



PIETY IN THE BUNKER

or from all the godly defenders of Presidential crime. As Buckley said: "This venture will bring yet further discredit to President Nixon—and discredit to Fr. McLaughlin. And, I might add, should do so, even as we dishonor those tame priests who have been trotted out in history by emperors and princes to baptize their grimy deeds." Even the mild-tempered G. K. Chesterton responded in this way when F. E. Smith (later Lord Birkenhead) argued in Parliament that Welsh disestablishment had "shocked the conscience of every Christian community in Europe." Chesterton's reply has become a classic:

*Are they clinging to their crosses,  
  F. E. Smith,  
Where the Breton boat-fleet tosses,  
  Are they, Smith?  
Do they, fasting, trembling,  
  bleeding,  
Wait the news from this our  
  city?  
Groaning 'That's the Second  
  Reading!  
Hissing 'There is still  
  Committee!  
If the voice of Cecil falters,  
  If McKenna's point has pith,  
Do they tremble for their altars?  
  Do they, Smith?*

The poem ranges out among Russian peasants, who have to get Hansard translated to find out what Wales is—so they can learn there is a curate's pay in Cardiff saved by Smith:

*It would greatly, I must own,  
  Soothe me, Smith!  
If you left this theme alone,  
  Holy Smith!  
For your legal cause or civil  
  You fight well and get your fee;  
For your God or dream or devil  
  You will answer not to me.  
Talk about the pews and steeples  
  And the Cash that goes therewith!  
But the souls of Christian  
  peoples . . .  
  Chuck it, Smith!*

It is the only answer that reaches far enough down to the current defenses of our pious men. Mr. Moon suggested that God made Nixon the center of empire on earth? Chuck it, Moon! Rabbi Korff claimed he did not "bring in religion," and then compared Nixon to King David? Chuck it, Korff! Father John claimed Nixon's temporizings would save us from situation morality? Chuck it, Mac! □