



# Blair's Faith and Future

by Jonathan Aitken

**T**ONY BLAIR IS NOW ENJOYING his first few weeks as a private citizen. At 54 he is far too young, energetic, and idealistic to retire. So what will he do with his new life as an ex-prime minister? The plurality and diversity of rumored occupations for him are a clear indication that he has not yet made up his mind. However, there is one certainty about his future plans—his faith will be central to them.

Blair is a committed Christian believer, but the faith dimension in his life has largely been kept under wraps by the conventions and pressures of the premiership. This is because British politics are far more secular at all levels than in the U.S. The best, or perhaps worst, example of this secularism came on the eve of the Iraq war when Blair was about to deliver a prime ministerial broadcast to the nation. In the script, which he had written in his own hand, his broadcast ended with the words “God Bless You All.” Such a conclusion would be normal in America. In Britain it was judged to be unacceptable, at least by Blair’s domineering press secretary, Alistair Campbell, who crossed out the final sentence saying, “We don’t do God.” The prime minister meekly complied with his subordinate, and God went unmentioned in the actual broadcast.

In fact, Blair had been thinking a great deal about God during the runup to the Iraq war. One of his closest colleagues revealed at the time that the prime minister was “always talking about theology” in the weeks before the invasion and that “he kept on read-

ing and re-reading Augustine’s doctrine of the Just War as well as commentaries on the Koran.”

This came as no great surprise to well-informed Blair-watchers, because his interest in interfaith theological writings had long been known to people in his circle. However, what has stayed unknown is how he puts his theology into practice. Does he pray, for example? A senior BBC television interviewer, Jeremy Paxman, once asked him in a live broadcast if he had ever prayed with George W. Bush. “Of course not,” replied Blair in an exasperated tone of derision.

Why the UK prime minister should have dismissed the notion of saying a prayer with the U.S. president quite so contemptuously is baffling. Many friendly observers might have thought that the two world leaders with a strong Christian faith would find it natural to share a word of private prayer together on the eve of hostilities. Blair’s defensiveness on this subject may have sprung from a wish to avoid ridicule from his predominantly pagan Labour Party supporters.

Blair’s Christian zeal has been much mocked in the British media. The satirical magazine *Private Eye* started the trend ten years ago with its long-running column “St. Albion Parish News—Incumbent The Rev A R P Blair M.A. (Oxon).” Written in the style of an ultra-cheesy Church of England vicar, “St. Albion Parish News” rarely fails to amuse even if the jokes can sometimes be cruel. In the week Blair announced his resignation, *Private Eye* ran a “Time for Prayer” box at the end of the St. Albion newsletter featuring a

hands-clasped Cherie Blair surrounded by a golden halo with the caption: "As Cherie looks forward to the vicar's retirement we all join her in praying that the vicar may be blessed with a great deal of money. As she puts it, 'Let U.S. pay!!!'"

These jibes, of which there have recently been many, imply that both Blairs are Mammon worshippers with an eye to the main chance in America. Tony will soon be following in Bill Clinton's well-heeled footsteps, say the cynics, making megabucks on the U.S. lecture circuit and accepting giant consultancy fees from corporations. Add to these rich pickings a multimillion-dollar memoirs deal from Rupert Murdoch and Blair's coffers will soon be overflowing.

The cynics may be right up to a point, for Mr. and Mrs. Blair are reported to have mortgage debts in excess of \$6 million on their new London home on the edge of Hyde Park. But that deficit will not take long to eradicate. Thereafter, once his bankers are quiescent, our former prime minister is expected to focus on a combination of the two issues dearest to his heart—faith and reconciliation.

**O**N THE MATTER OF HIS PERSONAL FAITH, Blair is likely to convert to Catholicism within a matter of months. For some years now he has been a Catholic in all but name, attending mass regularly with his wife and children but not taking the sacrament. This anomaly in his devotional life is explained by the constitutional conventions in Britain that guide the ancient relationships between church and state.

Ever since the days of King Henry VIII, who brought about the 16th-century break with Rome in order to facilitate his divorce arrangements, the Church of England has been the nation's established state church. Its official head is the Queen. Its bishops are appointed by her on the advice of the prime minister. And there's the rub. For although there is no legal barrier to the nation's leader being a Catholic, constitutional convention suggests that it would be a step too far to have Anglican bishops appointed by a Catholic premier. Curiously, this unofficial ban has not applied in the past to non-conformist occupants of No. 10 Downing Street such as Harold Wilson or to Britain's only Jewish prime minister, Benjamin Disraeli. He found his responsibility for Episcopal appointments so tiresome that he once said, "What, another bishop dead? I do believe these prelates die to vex me!"

Blair, by contrast, is fascinated rather than vexed

by the appointment of bishops. He has actively intervened in the process of selecting several of them in important sees such as Canterbury, York, and Liverpool. It would have been difficult for him to do this, so

**Although there is no legal barrier to the nation's leader being a Catholic, constitutional convention suggests that it would be a step too far to have Anglican bishops appointed by a Catholic premier.**

the conventional wisdom goes, if he had been a fully converted member of the Pope's flock. But now that his inbox no longer contains nominations for bishoprics to be approved or vetoed, Blair can and surely will be received into the Catholic Church without further delay, for that is where his spiritual heart lies.

Because he has an inquiring and well-stocked theological mind, it is unlikely that Blair will be content to sit silently in his pew. He is by temperament a spiritual activist. He may be obedient to the doctrines of his faith, but do not expect him to be silent about them. Preaching the occasional sermon will be right up his street, but he has already indicated that his future vocation requires a broader canvas. For in the final weeks of his premiership, Blair told one or two of his associates that he sees his future as a theological bridge-builder and reconciler of the three great Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.

This modest ambition to bring spiritual understanding and unity among the world's Jews, Muslims, and Christians will be quite some project. But do not underestimate Tony Blair's vision, energy, and commitment for it. History may suggest that his chances of success are low. Yet at this turning point of the 21st century, the hinge of history could be swinging in a different direction because the need for interfaith understanding has never been greater. If Blair can turn the present high levels of religious misunderstanding and hostility into mutual respect and peaceful co-existence between faiths, his contribution as an ex-prime minister may not be far behind his achievements as a prime minister. ❧

**Jonathan Aitken**, *The American Spectator's High Spirits* columnist, is the author of *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace*, published in June by Crossway Books. His biographies include *Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed (Doubleday)* and *Nixon: A Life*, now available in a new paperback edition (Regnery).