



A Pilgrim's Progress

by Jonathan Aitken

IN THE YEAR SINCE TONY BLAIR LEFT 10 Downing Street, by far the least understood and worst reported aspect of his life has been his spiritual journey. Its outward manifestations have included his conversion to Catholicism, his acceptance of a theological teaching role at Yale, the setting up of his own foundation to promote inter-faith understanding, and his groundbreaking lecture on faith at Westminster Cathedral. Although the aggressively secular commentators in the British media have done their best to mock and marginalize these activities, more thoughtful observers are beginning to realize that Blair has set out on a serious voyage, perhaps even a pilgrimage, of Christian apologetics and action. Where will it take him?

Let's start with Blair's recent Westminster Cathedral lecture, which was said to be his "coming out" as a Christian public speaker. Although billed as an address on "Faith and Globalisation," it was more of a personal and theological testimony in the tradition of John Henry Newman's *Apologia pro Vita Sua*. It began with an apology or at least a regretful explanation for a notorious remark, "We don't do God," made by the then Downing Street press secretary, Alastair Campbell, as he cut out the prime minister's "God bless you all" ending to a national television broadcast on the eve of the Iraq war. As Blair had

accepted Campbell's censorship at the time, the episode did need a little explaining to an audience packed with priests and prelates. "When Alastair said it, he didn't mean politicians shouldn't have faith; just that it was always a packet of trouble to talk about it," said Blair somewhat defensively, before moving to the higher ground of theology.

It was clear as the lecture progressed that the major theological influences on Blair have so far been ancient Catholic sages such as Aquinas, Ignatius, and Thomas à Kempis. The second chapter in Book I of Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ* had more than a few echoes in this Blair passage:

Faith answers to the basic, irrepressible, irresistible human wish for spiritual betterment, to do good, to think and act beyond the limitations of selfish human desires. More than that, it is rooted in a belief that the impulse to do good, or try to, is not utilitarian or self-interested but is about putting aside self, in being aware of something bigger, more central, more essential to our human condition than self.

Self-denying presidents or prime ministers, even after they have left office, are rare birds. But Blair, following on a road that has in recent times been well

traveled only by ex-president Jimmy Carter, sounds determined to navigate by a Christian compass toward humility. The mockers say this is impossible for a man so enthralled by the glittering prizes of Mammon that he is simultaneously fulfilling a \$10 million publishing contract with Rupert Murdoch for his memoirs, earning another \$10 million a year as a consultant for JPMorgan, and politicking to become the next president of the European Union.

But your High Spirits columnist, despite having been a political adversary of Tony Blair for many years in the House of Commons, is not among the cynics. The more I listened to his Westminster Cathedral lecture and the Q&A session that followed it, the more I recognized the transparently sincere humility and sense of Christian service in the character breathing through the sentences. "Today, precisely because all the fixed points of reference seem unfixed and constantly in flux," said Blair, "today is more than ever when we need to discover and rediscover our essential humility before God, our dignity as found in our lives being placed at the service of the Source and goal of everything."

QUOTES LIKE THESE from the lecture, right down to the erratic grammar and use of capital letters, make it clear that the composition was all Blair's own work, unaided by speechwriters. But why did he do it? The Westminster chattering classes, who are London's equivalent of the Beltway crowd, were completely baffled. However, one of Tony's oldest political cronies, Peter Mandelson, who now serves as EU trade commissioner in Brussels, came up with the only credible explanation. "He's been advised by everyone not to go public on religion," said Mandelson to a friend as they came out of the cathedral after the lecture, "but this has become Tony's greatest passion."

Because Blair is full of energy, his passions soon take the form of vigorous action. He is not one of those politicians who think they have achieved a result just because they have made a speech. So his action plan will now take the form of running for Prime Mover of Inter-faith Understanding and Peaceful Co-Existence. This is the work that his new foundation is going to do. It will have important differences from organizations that have been toiling in the inter-faith vineyards (alas usually growing sour grapes) for many years.

The Blair Foundation, in other words, will not be attempting to search for consensus in a doctrinal

melting pot. As a peripatetic international leader for the past ten years, Blair has studied the world's great religions closely enough to know that their differences will never be diminished. But he also believes

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that in the 21st century there is an opportunity to recognize those differences not as divisive historical relics but as modern, relevant sources of encouragement for peaceful human co-existence in an interdependent world.

The weakness in this game plan for mutual understanding between faiths is that there is a dangerous percentage of extremists in some religions who are simply not interested in the reasonable dialogue and cooperation that Blair envisages. The strength is that nobody of Blair's political stature has ever before made a global effort to argue the alternative case that a world that keeps faith at the center of its cultures offers a far more hopeful future than a world that rejects religion. It is in this cause that Blair is setting out to build modern bridges between ancient faiths.

The Christian faith can use a brave, international, contemporary champion who rises above the confines of organized and often tired religion to engage energetically with other faiths in the search for peaceful co-existence. "A faithless world is not one in which we want ourselves and our children to live," says Blair as he sets out his manifesto for this engagement across continents and cultures. If he leads his crusade by example as well as by eloquence, I for one will be cheering him on. ☸

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