

The Religiosity of

IS THE PERSONAL PRESIDENTIAL?

George W. Bush

Edmund D. Cohen

Until recently, I had not seriously thought that supernaturalism or superstition could be an issue of concern as regards the second Bush presidency. George W. Bush is, to be sure, a practicing fundamentalist Christian who begins each day meditating on the fustian prose of Oswald Chambers's *My Utmost for His Highest*. But he is also an Ivy League graduate, the scion of an old Republican establishment family, and the chosen front man for the conservative Republican Party establishment. Surely that establishment must have vetted its candidate well enough to rule out nominating an unstable religious eccentric. When he speaks in churchly terms, surely he is only employing regional idiom and one cannot take him literally. Or can one?

When then-Governor of Texas Bush was seeking the presidency in 2000, a story circulated that he had phoned the televangelist James Robison and said to him, "I've heard the call. I believe God wants me to run for president." Even that struck me as nothing more than standard Bible Belt hyperbole. What changed my mind is Stephen Mansfield's unauthorized 2004 campaign hagiography, *The Faith of George W. Bush*.² In it, Mansfield sets out an account of events following upon that phone call, based on an apparently recent interview with Robison:

On the day that the evangelist entered Bush's office, he was surprised to find political strategist Karl Rove there as well, and even more surprised at what Bush was about to say. "My life is changed," the governor said. "I had a drinking problem. I won't say I was an alcoholic, but it affected my relationships, even with my kids. It could have destroyed me. But I've given my life to Christ."

Robison, who had heard rumors of Bush's conversion, was struck by the sincerity he sensed. He was not prepared, though, for what came next. "I feel like God wants me to run for president," Bush said. "I can't explain it, but I sense my country is going to need me. Something is going to happen, and, at that time, my country is going to need me. I know it won't be easy, on me or my family, but God wants me to do it."

"In fact," Bush continued, "I really don't want to run. My father was president. My whole family has been affected by it. I know the price. I know what it will mean. I would be perfectly happy to have people point at me someday when I'm buying my fishing lures at Wal-Mart and say, 'That was our governor.' That's all I want. And if I run for president, that kind of life will be over. My life will never be the same. But I feel God wants me to do this, and I must do it."

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The president's prophetic profession, if it really was expressed this way, definitely goes over the line into the realm of magical thinking and delusion. Neither he nor Karl Rove has come forward to correct or to clarify Mansfield's account.

The president and Robison enjoy a very close relationship. Both the White House and Robison downplay it, and the mainstream media have not caught onto it yet. Robison visited with the president in the Oval Office in spring 2001, fall 2002, and perhaps at other times. Robison has been a guest repeatedly and perhaps frequently at the president's ranch in Crawford, Texas. Of "Bush's unique friendship with James Robison . . .," Mansfield writes, "[t]he two have prayed together while hiking Bush's ranch or talked about faith, gun in hand, while waiting for game to approach."¹

Robison was the featured speaker at the prayer breakfast preceding Bush's inauguration as Texas governor. In February 1999, then-Governor Bush appeared on Robison's televangelism show, *Life Today*—his only appearance on that kind of television program. Of the frequent phone conversations between



the president and Robison, Darren Barbee, writing in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, reported:

In the new century, his cell phone rings with George W. Bush on the line asking Robison to tell him how he came across in a speech. More recently, the president and the . . . televangelist have talked about the war in Iraq, about the greed that consumed Enron and about the battle for America's heart.

"I want you to tell me, spiritually, what do you sense?" Bush has asked the Euless [Texas] televangelist.⁵

JAMES ROBISON

To try to understand President Bush, we cannot help but scrutinize Robison. Now sixty years old, Robison is the product of the rape of a forty-year-old woman who tried but was unable to secure an abortion. After a hard-scrabble childhood, Robison rose in Southern Baptist circles. As a young man, he became a big draw on the revival circuit.

Since his 1968 entry into television, his popularity as a televangelist has waxed and waned. The scale of his current televangelism operation is modest. He has long been a high-profile figure on the Religious Right, and has usually been present when high-ranking Republicans met with top Religious Right leaders. Through the years, he has strayed from Southern Baptist doctrine and become a *de facto* Pentecostal or Charismatic. He has been through a phase of holding himself out as having special power to heal the sick by his praying.

By Robison's own account, he was often a "dark-visaged, angry preacher," railing against other preachers whom he considered too liberal, too greedy, or too lustful. In 1979, he was put off the air for strident anti-gay rhetoric. He came to attribute his much-criticized, angry demeanor, as well as turmoil in his personal life, to the activity of demons. After undergoing what he regarded as a successful exorcism performed by lay exorcist Milton Green, a kindler, gentler James Robison emerged. "Deliverance" or demon exorcism became part of his stock-in-trade.

In 1982, Robison befriended Texas millionaire T. Cullen Davis. Davis had been acquitted of the murder of his wife's lover and his stepdaughter in 1977. In 1979, Davis was acquitted again, this time of attempting to procure the murder for hire of fifteen people, including the judge who had presided in his divorce case. Davis owned over one million dollars worth of Asian religious art treasures made of jade, ivory, and gold. He wanted to contribute them to Robison's ministry. Robison opined that the objects were idols and had to be destroyed in obedience to Deuteronomy 7:25.⁶ Davis and Robison broke the art objects to pieces with hammers and dumped the shards into a lake.

According to Robison, there are but two worldviews: Biblical Christianity and Relativism. Biblical Christianity represents the "Absolutes." By "Relativism," he means complete lack of criteria for distinguishing right from wrong or truth from falsity. All those who are not Bible-believers are *ipso facto* Relativists. For Robison, liberal Democrats, Islamist terrorists, and all others who are not Christian Bible-believers count as Relativists and are therefore all interchangeable with one another.

What the myriad deceptively different forms of Relativism all have in common is unseen direction by demons or evil spirits:

Evil powers in the realm of darkness can affect and even control the actions of people. . . . The Bible refers to these powers as evil spirits, tormenting spirits, unclean spirits, seducing

spirits, deceiving spirits, spirits of bondage and murder and destruction. It is important to realize that not all destructive spirits are as obvious and despicable as those responsible for the tragedy of September 11 and other atrocities. Seducing spirits are often subtle, sophisticated, and in some ways attractive. They can control professors, politicians, artists, and even religious leaders including Jesus' own disciples. . . . *The entertainer, teacher or leader who undermines the relevance of absolute principles is no less demonically manipulated than the terrorist.* [Italics added.]⁷

Robison also believes that God communicates specific messages to believers by intervening in their thought processes:

I was driving down the road with my wife one day when I heard God speaking in my mind and my heart. It was not an audible voice, but it was nonetheless real. I heard Him say, "I really like the way you come to me. You don't just come to me with a list of requests and concerns. Instead, you crawl up into my arms, lay your head on my shoulder, and rest. *I like that.*" [Italics in original.]⁸

Without friends in the corridors of power, Robison would be a mere buffoon. But with the president of the United States presumably absorbing his preposterous teaching, there is a problem, to say the least. How vulnerable might President Bush actually be to such mind-rotting bunk? I contend that we are seeing its effects each day, in the largest and most overarching policies of the Bush administration.

IRAQ

Conspicuous by its absence from recent public discourse has been any plausible theory as to how it came to pass that President Bush entered office with his mind already made up to invade Iraq. The reasons the administration has contrived for that invasion *post hoc* are less than credible.

Iraq in the last days of Saddam Hussein was far from the most troublesome of WMD-capable rogue nations. Vitiated by years of embargo, Iraq had neither molested any of its neighbors nor shown any proclivity to resume doing so. Iraq had little truck with Islamist terrorists. At a time when running Islamist terrorists to ground was supposedly America's paramount foreign policy objective, the president diverted massive resources in order to invade a country with—for that region—a most un-Islamic regime. Iraq under Saddam repressed Islamists within its sphere of control more harshly than a regime with decent regard for human rights could have done, and permitted no young males to be indoctrinated in *madrasas*.

The possible ulterior motives that have been advanced—to revenge Saddam's attempt on the life of the elder President Bush, or to drum up business for Texas oil interests—could scarcely have prompted a decision so momentous. Irrational reasons must have played a large part in the genesis of this otherwise incomprehensible policy. It can be no mere coincidence that the war waged for no sufficient reason—perhaps even by mistake—happens also to be the one waged against a nation and a tyrant that, for the Christian fundamentalist decision maker, resonate with biblical prophecy.

Loathing for "Babylon" is a continual preoccupation throughout the Bible. The Bible's Babylon references typically pertain to the captivity of the Israelites during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar and their liberation when Cyrus, King of Persia, conquered Babylon and let the Israelites return to Jerusalem. Many such references appear to point to the re-emergence of horrid Babylon near the end of time and to its

dramatic annihilation before Christ's return.

Saddam liked to style himself as Nebuchadnezzar's successor. At the location of ancient Babylon, south of Baghdad, Saddam built a nationalistic ancient Babylon theme park. There he planned to replicate the fabled hanging gardens. Saddam identified far more closely with the glories of the distant, pre-Islamic past than with Islam.

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A fundamentalist Christian decision maker is inevitably handicapped at seeing Saddam dispassionately for the glorified street thug that he is. The demons, devil, and Antichrist crowding the imaginary landscape get in the way. Of course one will overestimate Saddam's capabilities wildly, if one imagines him to be some sort of preternatural being, to whose aid legions of ectoplasmic allies will come. After all, ectoplasmic allies do not respect United Nations embargoes.

Imagine the conversation that Robison and President Bush might have had about the Iraq war and Bible prophecy. The vituperations against Babylon in Revelation 17 and 18 would surely have been discussed:

And there came one of the seven angels which had the seven vials, and talked with me, saying unto me, Come hither: I will shew unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters. . . . And upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. . . . I saw another angel. . . . And he cried mightily with a strong voice, saying, Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird. . . . and she shall be utterly burned with fire. . . . And a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone, and cast it into the sea, saying, Thus with violence shall the great city Babylon be thrown down, and shall be found no more at all.¹⁰

No doubt Robison would have been capable of counseling his presidential pupil to run out and invade “Babylon” with the same flippancy he displayed when counseling Cullen Davis to smash the art treasures and throw them into the lake. The big question is whether or not President Bush was capable of coming by his *idée fixe* about invading Iraq in such a manner.

UNDER THE INFLUENCE

There have been many accounts of the president's dangerously inflated confidence in his own hunches and gut feelings. He trusts his gut in preference to mastering the tedious information needed to craft reasoned policy decisions. It would be only a short leap further for him to persuade himself that those hunches and gut feelings come from God. Did not God give him a sign and perform a wonder in making the Florida count come out the way it did?

A similar explanation might apply to the president's disastrous combination of unrestrained spending and strangling revenues through lopsided tax cuts for the affluent. Maybe

Bush thinks he will get a dispensation from the laws of arithmetic—like the miracle of the loaves and fishes. Or maybe he runs up deficits as if there were no tomorrow because he really expects Christ to come back more quickly than our country can go bankrupt.

Both of these policies will predictably fail, not far into the second term President Bush seeks. While it is devoutly to be hoped that Iraq will succeed in forming a decent and stable government, the chances are not good. The realistic expectation is for Iraq's politics to be dominated by Farsi-speaking Shiite ayatollahs not long after sovereignty is transferred. After that, Iraq will likely break up much as Yugoslavia did. As for the president's fiscal policies, “if the Lord tarrics” they will quickly and with absolute arithmetic certainty prove unsustainable. What can the president be thinking? What could possess him to act so as to undercut his own contemplated second term in office?

For now, President Bush is on his best behavior, looking toward the 2004 election. Once re-elected, how might he change? The President Bush we know today is a far cry from the moderate, bipartisan Governor Bush who ran for president, styling himself a “uniter, not a divider” and professing a platform of humility in foreign policy with no nation building. In a second term, would we see a higher-profile Robison given the run of the White House, perhaps to emerge as an American Rasputin? Would Bush devote the powers of his office to fulfilling prophecies that he thinks are supposed to precede the return of Christ? Does the president fantasize about being in office when Christ returns—of receiving Him in the Oval Office, and being told, “Well done, my good and faithful servant” in the Rose Garden just before being taken up into the clouds?

I hope we never find out. **ff**

Notes

1. Tony Carnes, “A Presidential Hopeful's Progress,” *Christianity Today*, October 2, 2000.

2. Stephen Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush* (Lake Mary, Florida: Charisma House, 2003.)

3. *Ibid.*, p. 109. Robison gives a somewhat similar but far less damaging account of the conversation in his current book, *The Absolutes: Freedom's Only Hope* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House, 2002), pp. 232–33. Robison says the meeting took place in August 1998 and Mrs. Robison was also present.

4. Mansfield, p. 156. See also Robison's own account of such a visit, *The Absolutes*, pp. 130–31.

5. Darren Barbee, “The Evolving James Robison,” *FL Worth Star-Telegram*, June 11, 2003. See also Jodi Enda, “Bush Takes His Personal Faith a Step Beyond Predecessors,” Knight Ridder Tribune Washington Bureau, April 13, 2001.

6. “The graven images of their gods shall ye burn with fire: thou shalt not desire the silver or gold that is on them, nor take it unto thee, lest thou be snared therein: for it is an abomination to the LORD thy God.”

7. Robison's “Absolutes” are nothing but mainstream American civic values: “People Matter Most,” “Greed Destroys,” “Character Counts,” etc. The chapter on “People Matter Most” (*The Absolutes*, pp. 83–99) could pass for a discussion of secular humanism! Robison finesses the question of how these “Absolutes” arise from the Bible. (They are, for the most part, at odds with what I understand the Bible to be teaching.)

8. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

10. Revelation 17:1, 5; 18:1,2, 8, 21.