

Soldiers of Christ II

Feeling the hate with the National Religious Broadcasters

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By Chris Hedges.

Since the reelection of George W. Bush in November, the rhetoric on the Christian right has grown triumphal and proud; rumors of spiritual war are abroad in the heartland, and fervent whispers of revolution echo among the pews and folding chairs of the nation's megachurches. I have traveled to Anaheim, California, to observe the rising power of the evangelical political movement at first hand. Orange County, along with Colorado Springs, is a center of the new militant Christianity, and it is here, among friends, that the National Religious Broadcasters association—which brings together some 1,600 Christian radio and television broadcasters, who claim to reach up to 141 million listeners and viewers—is holding its annual convention.

I am standing in line at the Starbucks in the Anaheim Hilton with Dee Simmons and her friend Samantha Landy. Around her neck Simmons wears a cross of gold studded with diamonds, and her face, which betrays neither line nor crease, is carefully highlighted with heavy makeup. Scores of men and women, all conservatively dressed in coats and ties or skirts, stand expectantly, waiting for a sign to beckon them next door to the Anaheim Convention Center, where speeches, booths, and seminars await.

We've known each other just a few minutes, but already I can tell you that Simmons once led a life of constant sorrow, that in 1987 she was diagnosed with breast cancer and before long underwent a modified radical mastectomy. That tragedy led her, she says, to turn her focus away from the designer-clothes boutiques she owned in Dallas and New York. "When God gave me my life back," she says, "I decided to make a difference in people's lives." And so she embraced nutrition.

Simmons reaches into her purse and draws out several pamphlets from her company, Ultimate Living. She tells me about her books, which include *It's a Miracle! It's a Green Miracle & It Saved My Life!*, and mentions the numerous Christian talk shows she regularly appears on, including Pat Robertson's *The 700 Club*, *Hope Today*, *Praise, Something Good Tonight*, and *The Armstrong Williams Show*.

"I was saved and found Christ when I was three," she says. "I'm sixty-four. My daughter is thirty-six." She waits for the effect of her age, which she will repeat more than once, to sink in. I can't take my eyes off her smooth face and sculpted cheekbones.

Landy is also active in the life of faith. She tells me that she runs "Christian Celebrity Luncheons" in Palm Springs as part of her "salvation outreach for snowbirds." Her ministry focuses on country clubs and golf courses, she says, because that's where people feel comfortable. Landy, a redhead, never stops smiling.

"I bring in celebrity speakers," she says, "like Gavin MacLeod, he was the Captain on *Love Boat*, and Ronda Fleming, she was in over forty films and starred with Bing Crosby."

Landy, like Simmons, appears on Christian television shows. She has published books with titles such as *A Shalom Morning* and *God's Creatures*. Her list of celebrities includes Donna Douglas from *The Beverly Hillbillies*, Ann B. Davis, who was Alice on *The Brady Bunch*, and Lauren Chapin, who played Kathy on *Father Knows Best*.

My new friends, evidently minor celebrities themselves in the world of Christian broadcasting, have come to Anaheim for the yearly convention because it is the only time they can see all the major Christian broadcasters in one place. They are picture-perfect members of a new Christian elite, showy, proud of how

God has blessed them with material wealth and privilege, and hooked into the culture of celebrity and power.

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I carry my coffee across the stone courtyard to the curved glass and gleaming towers of the convention center, the largest in California. Within the exhibition hall on the first floor, 320 display booths—and, at the far end of the hall, the twisted remains of an Israeli bus blown up by Palestinian suicide bombers in Jerusalem—float on an enormous sea of soft blue carpeting. The Israeli tourism ministry has one of the largest display spaces in the hall. People from the Christian Law Association hand out yardsticks filled with gum. A Virginia web-design company offers "church websites the way God intended." A bearded man dressed as a biblical prophet is pushing tours of the Holy Land. I see anti-abortion booths and evidence of fringe groups such as Jews for Jesus and Accuracy in Media, one of whose representatives hands me a report with the title "American Troops Cheer Attacks on U.S. Media."

All the seminars and workshops are taking place on the upper floors. One seminar is entitled "Finding God in Hollywood." Another is called "Invading Cities for Christ: The Thousand-Day Plan."

In the parking lot outside the center, I come across a pickup truck with large hand-painted panels bearing anti-gay slogans and a round red circle with a line through the center superimposed on the faces of two men kissing. STOP THE INSANITY, it says across the top. I pick up one of the pamphlets in a metal box on the side of the truck: "Protect Your Family & Friends from the Dangers of . . . Homosexuality: The Truth!" It lists "the facts about homosexuality they refuse to teach in Public Schools or report on the Evening News!" including: "homosexuals average 500 sexual partners in their short lifetime" and "because of unsanitary sexual practices homosexuals carry the bulk of all bowel disease in America."

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The opening session is held on the third floor, in an enormous room with a round stage surrounded on three sides by row upon row of folding chairs. The dimly lit room holds thousands of true believers. Large television screens hang from the ceilings; a grand piano sits unused on the stage near the podium. Bob Lepine, the round-faced co-host of *FamilyLife Today*, a radio show broadcast from Little Rock, Arkansas, tells us that this session has been sponsored by the Family Research Council, a Washington think tank dedicated to promoting "the Judeo-Christian worldview as the basis for a just, free, and stable society." We watch a video in which Lepine wanders the godforsaken beaches near Anaheim asking surfers and other lost Californians what the letters NRB mean to them. No one knows, but the guesses evoke laughter from the hall.

Lepine talks about the old days, when the convention was held in Washington, D.C., in February. He seems pleased to be in California, where "it's warm and you can go to the beach and see weird people."

Lepine then shows us another video, this one featuring the current president of the Family Research Council, former Louisiana state representative Tony Perkins, a telegenic man who authored the American History Preservation Act, a law intended to prevent "censorship of America's Christian heritage in Louisiana public schools," and who also wrote the first Covenant Marriage Law.

"Deep in the nation's capital," a baritone voice booms as the camera pans across the Washington mall, "America's culture was hijacked by a secular movement determined to redefine society from religious freedom to the right to life. These radicals were

doing their best to destroy two centuries of traditional values, and no one seemed to be able to stop them—until now.

“Will Congress undo 200 years of tradition?” the video asks ominously. “Not on our watch.”

The mood of the convention is set. All Christians, everywhere, are under attack. Perkins, dressed in a dark suit and white shirt, climbs the stairs onto the stage. He promises to halt “the cultural decline” and to end “misguided” judicial decisions. Before long, Frank Wright, the new president of NRB, takes the stage. Wright, who has white hair and a cold demeanor, lauds the recent transformation in Washington and says that 130 members of the House of Representatives are now “born-again.” He tells a story about a late-night private tour of the Capitol in which he and a group of other pastors stopped and prayed over Hillary Clinton’s Senate floor desk. The crowd roars its approval.

“Today, the calls for diversity and multiculturalism are nothing more than thinly veiled attacks on anyone willing, desirous, or compelled to proclaim Christian truths,” he says. “Today, calls for tolerance are often a subterfuge, because they will tolerate just about anything except Christian truth. Today, we live in a time when the message entrusted to you is more important than ever before to reach a world desperate to know Christ.

“Does it strike you,” he asks, “that we are the first generation in the history of the world that might see every nation, tongue, and tribe reached with the Gospel?”

Wright promises the audience that as the new president of NRB he will fight to block the passage of hate-crime legislation, something many Christian broadcasters fear might be used to halt their attacks on gays and lesbians.

“For the first time in history, representatives and senators may pass hate-crime legislation,” he says, “which is one step to oppose what you do as against the law.

“If we had to give equal time to every opposing viewpoint, there would be no time to proclaim the truth that we have been commanded to proclaim,” he says. “We will fight the Fairness Doctrine, tooth and nail. It could be the end of Christian broadcasting as we know it if we do not.”

The preachers that follow, including Illinois evangelist and radio host James MacDonald, pound home the theme of persecution by “secular humanists” who want to destroy the values and faith of “Bible-believing Christians.” MacDonald runs a church in Arlington Heights, Illinois, and is heard regularly on more than 650 Christian radio outlets.

“How many of you out there think it’s unpopular to preach the Word?” he asks. Hundreds of hands shoot up into the air.

MacDonald quotes liberally from the Book of Revelation, the only place in the New Testament where Jesus (arguably) endorses violence and calls for vengeance against nonbelievers. It is, along with the apocalyptic visions of St. Paul, the movement’s go-to text. Rarely mentioned these days is the Jesus of the four Gospels, the Jesus who speaks of the poor and the marginalized, who taught followers to turn the other cheek and love their enemies, the Jesus who rejected the mantle of secular power.

“His eyes are like a flame of fire,” MacDonald tells us. “Out of his mouth goes a sharp sword, and with it he can strike the nations. He treads the wine press of the fierceness and wrath of the Almighty God, and on his robe and on his thigh a name is written, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Jesus commands all men everywhere to come to the knowledge of Him.”

He reminds us, quoting theologian Peter Berger, that “ages of faith are not marked by dialogue but by proclamation” and that “there is power in the unapologetic proclamation of truth. There is power in it. This is a kingdom of power.” When he says the word “power,” he draws it out for emphasis. He tells the crowd to shun the “persuasive words of human wisdom.” Truth, he says, does “not rest in the wisdom of men but the power of God.” Then, in a lisping, limp-wristed imitation of liberals, he mocks, to

laughter and applause, those who want to “share” and be sensitive to the needs of others.

MacDonald leaves little doubt that the convention is meant to serve as a rallying cry for a new and particularly militant movement in Christian politics, one that is sometimes mistaken for another outbreak of mere revivalism. In fact, this movement is a curious hybrid of fundamentalists, Pentecostals, Southern Baptists, conservative Catholics, Charismatics, and other evangelicals, all of whom are at war doctrinally but who nonetheless share a belief that America is destined to become a Christian nation, led by Christian men who are in turn directed by God. For someone like me, who grew up in the church and was keenly aware of the rigid lines imposed by warring sects and denominations, the new alliances are startling. I notice uniformed officers from the Salvation Army at the convention, something that would have been unthinkable in the past. Lately, the leaders of the movement have even begun to reach out to the Mormons.

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What the disparate sects of this movement, known as Dominionism, share is an obsession with political power. A decades-long refusal to engage in politics at all following the Scopes trial has been replaced by a call for Christian “dominion” over the nation and, eventually, over the earth itself. Dominionists preach that Jesus has called them to build the kingdom of God in the here and now, whereas previously it was thought that we would have to wait for it. America becomes, in this militant biblicism, an agent of God, and all political and intellectual opponents of America’s Christian leaders are viewed, quite simply, as agents of Satan. Under Christian dominion, America will no longer be a sinful and fallen nation but one in which the Ten Commandments form the basis of our legal system, Creationism and “Christian values” form the basis of our educational system, and the media and the government proclaim the Good News to one and all. Aside from its proselytizing mandate, the federal government will be reduced to the protection of property rights and “homeland” security.¹¹ Some Dominionists (not all of whom accept the label, at least not publicly) would further require all citizens to pay “tithes” to church organizations empowered by the government to run our social-welfare agencies, and a number of influential figures advocate the death penalty for a host of “moral crimes,” including apostasy, blasphemy, sodomy, and witchcraft. The only legitimate voices in this state will be Christian. All others will be silenced.

The traditional evangelicals, those who come out of Billy Graham’s mold, are not necessarily comfortable with the direction taken by the Dominionists, who now control most of America’s major evangelical organizations, from the NRB to the Southern Baptist Convention, and may already claim dominion over the Christian media outlets. But Christians who challenge Dominionists, even if they are fundamentalist or conservative or born-again, tend to be ruthlessly thrust aside.

I have lunch with Luis Palau, a well-known evangelical preacher who is close to Billy Graham. He is an affable older man, an Argentine, who has a worldliness refreshing after even a short time among Dominionists. His focus is on personal salvation, not the achievement of political power. He refused to become involved in the referendum in Oregon, where his organization is based, to ban gay marriage. Like Graham, Palau is no supporter of gay rights, but he bristles at the coarseness of calls for absolute power by Christian leaders and at the anti-intellectualism that characterizes the new movement. He avoids the caustic humor used by many Dominionists to belittle homosexuals, “effete” intellectuals, and all those whom they lump into the category of “secular humanists.” The use of abortion and gay marriage as rallying points worries him.

“There are some Christians who have gone overboard,” Palau says, choosing his words carefully. “The message has become a little distorted in states where they talk about change yet focus on only one issue. We need a fuller transformation. The great thing Billy Graham did was to bring intellectualism back to fundamentalism.

“I don’t think it is wrong to want to see political change, especially in places like Latin America,” he says. “Something has to happen in politics. But it has to be based on convictions. We have to overcome the sense of despair. I worked in Latin America in the days when almost every country had a dictator. I dreamed, especially as a kid, of change, of freedom and justice. But I believe that change comes from personal conviction, from leading a more biblical lifestyle, not by Christianizing a nation. If we become called to Christ, we will build an effective nation through personal ethics. When you lead a life of purity, when you respect your wife and are good to your family, when you don’t waste money gambling and womanizing, you begin to work for better schools, for more protection and safety from your community. All change, historically, comes from the bottom up.”

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Early Sunday morning, in a ballroom on the second floor of the Hilton Hotel, the Israeli Ministry of Tourism is hosting a breakfast. Several hundred people, all dressed in the appropriate skirts and business suits of American churchgoing people, are seated at round tables with baskets of bread, fruit plates, and silver pitchers of coffee. Waiters serve plates of scrambled eggs and creamed spinach. I count no more than half a dozen people who are not white. On the platform is a huge picture of the Dome of the Rock, the spot in Jerusalem where the third Temple will be rebuilt to herald, at least according to the Christians in the room, the second coming of Christ. Some 400,000 Christian tourists visit Israel each year, and, what with the precipitous decline in Israel’s tourism industry in recent years, these people have become a valued source of revenue.

The strange alliance in this case is premised upon the Dominionist belief that Israel must rule the biblical land in order for Christ to return, though when he does, all Jews who do not convert to Christianity supposedly will be incinerated as the believers are lifted into heaven; all this is courteously left unmentioned at the breakfast. The featured speakers include Avraham Hirschsohn, who is the new Israeli minister of tourism, and Michael Medved, a cultural conservative and a nationally syndicated radio talk-show host. Medved is also one of the most prominent Jewish defenders of Mel Gibson’s biopic *The Passion of the Christ*.

Hirschsohn praises the audience for standing “with us for the last four years when nobody else would. Thank you.” He then announces, to grateful applause, that the tourism ministry plans to build a “Pilgrim Center” near Galilee.

“A more Christian America is good for the Jews,” Medved says. “This is obvious. Take a look at this support for Israel. A more Christian America is good for America, something Jewish people need to be more cognizant about and acknowledge. A more Jewish community is good for the Christians, not just because of the existence of allies but because a more Jewish community is less seduced by secularism.”

The cast of characters that takes the stage next is illuminating. Glenn Plummer, a black minister from Detroit who is active in the Republican Party, assures us that he knows all about Muslims because “I come from Detroit, where the biggest mosque in America is.”

“It didn’t take 9/11 to show me there is a global battle going on for the souls of men,” he says. “When Islam comes into a place, it is intent on taking over everything, not only government but the business, the neighborhoods, everything.”

The Christian writer Kay Arthur, who can barely contain her tears when speaking of Israel, professes that although she loves America, if she had to choose between America and Israel, “I would stand with Israel, stand with Israel as a daughter of the King of Kings, stand according to the word of God.” She goes on to quote at length from Revelation, speaking of Jesus seated on a throne floating about Jerusalem as believers are raptured up toward him in the sky.

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After breakfast I have a look at the charred remains of public bus #19 in the convention hall. Its sides are scorched black, and the doors in the center of the bus are twisted hideously. Within, the bus’s steel frame is bent outward and shattered. The exterior has been adorned with banners bearing biblical quotations: “I will plant Israel in their own land, never again to be uprooted from the land I have given them” (Amos 9:15); “And I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse” (Genesis 12:3).

The bus, owned by a Christian Zionist group calling itself The Jerusalem Connection International, was destroyed by Palestinian suicide bombers in January 2004, killing eleven people. According to information from the group, its president, retired U.S. Brigadier General James Hutchens, looks at “issues related to Israel from a Biblical perspective.” The bus has been displayed at The Hague and in numerous rallies throughout the United States. At a table next to the bus, a Jerusalem Connection official hands out pamphlets encouraging the reader to “Bring Bus #19 to Your Community!”

At a nearby booth that advertises Christian broadcasts to the Arab world, an Egyptian woman, a Christian, tells me that she has been reduced to tears on several occasions by enraged conventioners who, after visiting the bus, tell her that all Arabs are “terrorists.” I speak as well with an Israeli woman, who introduces herself as Marina. She has long blonde hair and is wearing knee-high leather boots. Marina, who emigrated to Israel from Holland and lives on a cooperative mango farm near the Sea of Galilee, says she is “embarrassed” to be at the convention. “These people are anti-Semitic,” she says, speaking softly as conventioners move past the large Israeli display space. The demonization of Muslims and Palestinians by the speakers makes her especially uneasy. I ask her why the tourism ministry is here in the first place. “Money,” she says. “It is all about money. No one else visits Israel.”

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On Monday night James Dobson, the founder and chairman of Focus on the Family, holds an informal reception and talk with his son, Ryan. The walls are decorated with red, white, and blue bunting, and people are eating popcorn, hot dogs, and pizza. There are Ping-Pong tables set up in the corners, and in the center of the room are three bar-stool chairs and another Ping-Pong table, this one bathed in light. Several men are wearing umpire uniforms.

Dobson is perhaps the most powerful figure in the Dominionist movement. He was instrumental three years ago in purging the moderate chairman of the NRB from his post and speaks frequently with the White House. He was a crucial player in getting out the Christian vote for George W. Bush. Dobson says he was born again at the age of three during a church service conducted by his father, a Nazarene minister. He attended Pasadena College and received a Ph.D. in child development from the University of Southern California. While teaching at USC, he wrote his book *Dare to Discipline*, which encourages parents to spank their children with “sufficient magnitude to cause the child to cry genuinely.” (The book has sold more than 3.5 million copies since its release in 1970.) Dobson now works

out of an eighty-one-acre campus in Colorado Springs that has its own zip code. He employs 1,300 people, sends out 4 million pieces of mail each month, and is heard on radio broadcasts in ninety-nine countries. His estimated listening audience is more than 200 million worldwide; in the United States alone, he appears on 100 television stations each day. He calls for a constitutional amendment to permit prayer in the public schools. He sponsors a group called "Love Won Out," which holds monthly conferences around the country for those "suffering" from same-sex attraction. He likens the proponents of gay marriage to the Nazis, has backed political candidates who called for the execution of abortion providers, defines embryonic stem-cell research as "state-funded cannibalism," and urges Christian parents to pull their children out of public-school systems. He has issued warnings to the Bush Administration that his extremist agenda must begin to be implemented in Washington and by the federal courts if the Republican Party wants his continued support. Dobson apparently believes that he is without sin.

The evening is billed as a tournament, with competing teams of Ping-Pong players battling their way up the ladder until the big winners play Dobson and his son, Ryan, whom the announcer calls "the double Ds." Before the final match, father and son take questions from the audience. Seated near Dobson is his wife, Shirley, whose only public role seems to be to whisper reminders in her husband's ear. All speakers at the event make much of their marriage and fidelity. Not far away is Ryan's fiancée, and Ryan makes a point of telling the crowd that he and Laura are "remaining pure" and will not have sex for the next 120 days until they are married. At first, the questions focus on how Dobson has raised such an exemplary Christian family. One woman, who says she runs a Christian home, asks Dobson the secret to getting her own children to have the enthusiasm for Christ she sees in Ryan.

"Shirley and I began fasting and praying for the kids when they were born," Dobson says. "We asked the Lord a number of things, but especially that the Lord burn within them."

But this is Ryan's night. Dobson himself is often silent, allowing his son to answer most of the questions with a rambling self-importance. He sits slightly hunched on his stool in a dark sweater, his reddish hair combed in long strands over his balding pate, listening to the boy. He does, though, speak up at one point to clarify his position on SpongeBob SquarePants, which received wide media attention.

"I did not say SpongeBob was gay," Dobson says. "All I said was he was part of a video produced by a group with strong linkages to the homosexual community that's teaching things like tolerance and diversity. And you can see where they're going with that. They're teaching kids to think different about homosexuality."

Ryan, with closely cropped blond hair and a drooping Fu Manchu mustache, exhorts the audience to find a cause "worth fighting for" and "worth dying for." He says he has learned how to reach young people. He knows their culture. He talks about his passion for surfing and skateboarding. Then he says, "People keep saying we need to change the discussion on abortion before we can ban it. We don't need to change the discussion. Like, 80 percent of the country is against abortion. What kind of a country fines people \$25,000 for killing a bald eagle but doesn't do anything when unborn babies get thrown in the trash?"

The older Dobson speaks in support of his son's talents and commitment to Christ. Ryan worked for a year at the Family Research Council, founded by his father, which is perhaps the most influential radical Christian-right lobbying group in Washington. He has published two books, *Be Intolerant Because Some Things Are Just Stupid* and *2Die4*, and is clearly being groomed by his father to inherit the Dobson empire.

When it comes time for the Ping-Pong final, the Dobsons easily demolish their opponents.

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I leave the convention early Tuesday morning on a shuttle van to LAX. I am wondering whether I shouldn't stay in California a few more days, in order to attend a funeral. Chris Marquis, a close friend and colleague of mine at the *New York Times*, died while I was out here from complications brought on by AIDS. I learned of his death on the first day of the convention, and even a few days of the Dominionists' bigotry against homosexuals has been more than I could stomach.

I can't help but recall the words of my ethics professor at Harvard Divinity School, Dr. James Luther Adams, who told us that when we were his age, and he was then close to eighty, we would all be fighting the "Christian fascists."

He gave us that warning twenty-five years ago, when Pat Robertson and other prominent evangelists began speaking of a new political religion that would direct its efforts at taking control of all major American institutions, including mainstream denominations and the government, so as to transform the United States into a global Christian empire. At the time, it was hard to take such fantastic rhetoric seriously. But fascism, Adams warned, would not return wearing swastikas and brown shirts. Its ideological inheritors would cloak themselves in the language of the Bible; they would come carrying crosses and chanting the Pledge of Allegiance.

Adams had watched American intellectuals and industrialists flirt with fascism in the 1930s. Mussolini's "Corporatism," which created an unchecked industrial and business aristocracy, had appealed to many at the time as an effective counterweight to the New Deal. In 1934, *Fortune* magazine lavished praise on the Italian dictator for his defanging of labor unions and his empowerment of industrialists at the expense of workers. Then as now, Adams said, too many liberals failed to understand the power and allure of evil, and when the radical Christians came, these people would undoubtedly play by the old, polite rules of democracy long after those in power had begun to dismantle the democratic state. Adams had watched German academics fall silent or conform. He knew how desperately people want to believe the comfortable lies told by totalitarian movements, how easily those lies lull moderates into passivity.

Adams told us to watch closely the Christian right's persecution of homosexuals and lesbians. Hitler, he reminded us, promised to restore moral values not long after he took power in 1933, then imposed a ban on all homosexual and lesbian organizations and publications. Then came raids on the places where homosexuals gathered, culminating on May 6, 1933, with the ransacking of the Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin. Twelve thousand volumes from the institute's library were tossed into a public bonfire. Homosexuals and lesbians, Adams said, would be the first "deviants" singled out by the Christian right. We would be the next.