

The US media and the pope—an assault on the separation of church and state

By Bill Van Auken
6 April 2005

There are still 10 nations in the world where Roman Catholicism enjoys the archaic status of a state religion. The United States does not happen to be one of them. However, one would never guess this was the case given the unending exaltation of Pope John Paul II over the past several days by the US government and the mass media.

The Bush administration has ordered flags in the US flown at half-mast for the death of the head of the Church of Rome, and the US president will fly to the Vatican to attend the funeral. Both actions are without precedent in a country where the separation of church and state is a foundation of a Constitution that was the product of a revolution inspired in no small part by hostility to state-sponsored religion.

The media has seized upon the long-anticipated death of the 84-year-old pontiff to subject the American public to a saturation bombardment of religious obscurantism and superstition. The pomp surrounding the pope has effectively drowned out all other news, from the fighting and dying in Iraq to the growing signs of economic crisis within the US itself.

The sheer length and scale of this coverage is mind-numbing. Beginning with a morbid and pointless papal death watch last Wednesday—two days before the pope's demise—and culminating in the funeral service this coming Friday, the major television news networks have conducted endless live broadcasts from Vatican City, in which television anchors and reporters have competed in setting new lows of sycophancy.

Interminable discussion of Catholic ritual—including the matter-of-fact report that a Vatican chamberlain taps the pope's skull with a silver hammer to make sure that he is dead—is interspersed with breathless declarations of the pope's spiritual greatness. There is not an ounce of objectivity, never mind hardheaded analysis, in this coverage, which the insipid TV announcers could just as well have delivered wearing clerical collars.

“Whether he was the man of the century or the prophet of a spiritual renaissance may be a judgment call,” declared CNN in one of its more restrained assessments.

Would one ever imagine from this that the Catholic Church has historically served as a bastion of reaction and a center of opposition to both science and social progress? Every battle in the modern era to expand democratic rights has been waged in open conflict with the Vatican, which defended feudalism and monarchy against republicanism during the period of the great bourgeois revolutions, and then sided with capitalism against the working class and socialism.

There are an estimated 65 million American Catholics, approximately 23 percent of the US population. No doubt, among many of the Church's believers the pope's death is an occasion for genuine mourning. But these sentiments are by no means as universally mindless and uncritical as the maudlin wake staged by the mass media.

Karol Wojtyla, the little-known Polish cleric who was elected to the head the papacy in 1978, was a man, after all, not a saint. He was the head of an organization that is both a state-within-a-state and a massive multi-national corporation, with billions of dollars in assets that trace their origins to the Church's historical status as the world's largest and most oppressive landlord.

There is no doubt that Wojtyla was a man of ability. A former actor and skilled political operator who honed his abilities in navigating the complex relations between church and state in Stalinist-ruled Poland, he played a significant role in both Church and world affairs that deserves to be analyzed.

Many recognize Pope John Paul II as the leader of a counter-reformation within the Church, who rolled back the innovations of Vatican II from the 1960s, when the Catholic hierarchy perceived a need to adapt itself to the growing wave of radicalization within the international working class and among the peoples of the oppressed

countries.

He is widely identified with a renewed rigidity on issues such as birth control, abortion and sexuality. His promotion of a “culture of life” became a readily adaptable campaign slogan for George W. Bush and the Republican right, and the Catholic Church’s crusade against same-sex marriage was adopted as the linchpin of Bush’s re-election campaign.

John Paul II will be forever associated with the unholy alliance the Vatican forged with the Reagan administration and the CIA in period of the early 1980s, when US imperialism turned from a strategy of containment of the Soviet Union to one of escalating economic, political and military pressure aimed at producing its collapse.

There were no formal diplomatic relations between the Vatican and the US until 1984, when they were established by the Reagan administration at the height of this reactionary conspiracy. Such ties were inimical to the principles upon which the country was founded.

These principles were summed up in the 1960 statement by then-Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kennedy: “I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute—where no Catholic prelate would tell the president (should he be a Catholic) how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote ...”

A visceral anti-communist, the pope’s collaboration with the CIA and the US State Department extended well beyond his native Poland, where he played a pivotal role in subordinating the mounting discontent of Polish workers to Washington’s aims.

In Latin America—home to half of the world’s 1.1 billion Catholics—the pope rigorously suppressed the Liberation Theology movement that sought to identify the Church with the poor by championing social transformation. The Vatican under John Paul II subjected the supporters of Liberation Theology to a modern-day version of the Inquisition.

The pope blessed US-backed dictators like Augusto Pinochet and turned his back on the slaughter of thousands of Catholic priests, nuns and lay workers by the military and CIA-organized terrorists in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. While the Vatican pleaded for amnesty for the murderers and torturers of Argentina’s fascist military regime, the pope steadfastly refused to meet with the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who defied the dictatorship to demand the return of the “disappeared.”

All of this real history is rigorously censored from the mass media’s propaganda onslaught. Likewise excluded as permissible topics of discussion are the manifest crisis of the Catholic Church in the US itself, where it has faced a shrinking priesthood, and a series of child sexual abuse scandals and lawsuits that the pope’s closest associates sought to suppress.

What is the purpose of this massive and one-sided media campaign on behalf of the dead pope? It is hardly an accident that the media moved seamlessly from its shameful coverage of the Terri Schiavo case to its unblinking focus on the Vatican.

In the former, it served as a megaphone for the religious right, presenting the position of a relative handful of right-wing fanatics as the voice of the people. In the latter, it has sought to portray the papacy—an institution associated historically with the Inquisition, feudal oppression and hostility to science—as an object of universal veneration.

The intended effect is the same—to suffocate all independent and critical thinking through the non-stop promotion of irrationalism, backwardness and lies. By means of wall-to-wall coverage across the network span, the media acts to demoralize anyone who fails to embrace the officially sanctioned views and emotions—to convince them that they are out of step and isolated. In short, the aim is to intimidate.

The corporate-controlled media performed the same essential function during the buildup to the war in Iraq, excluding any hint of the popular dissent that was widespread and mounting, and aiding government efforts to terrorize the American people into acquiescing to the war on the false pretense that it was a response to September 11.

The official mourning of the pope and the media’s universal genuflection toward Rome express, in the final analysis, the unwillingness and inability of any faction within the ruling establishment to defend even the most basic democratic principles upon which the United States was founded, including the core tenet of separation of church and state.

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