

Charles Colson's complaint

by *Bill Berkowitz*

Opponents of faith-based prison programs are enabling terrorists, says Watergate felon Charles Colson

Those opposed to faith-based prison projects are blind to the threat of terrorism in the "homeland" from former inmates who have converted to Islam while in America's prisons, Charles Colson, one of President Richard Nixon's key operatives during the Watergate years, recently charged in one of his BreakPoint commentaries.

Stung by a federal district court judge's decision that his InnerChange Freedom Initiative, a faith-based prison program operating in Iowa's prisons is unconstitutional, Colson, is using a recent report about the growing threat of Islamic terrorists being recruited in U.S. prisons, to argue that support for his faith-based prison program is essential to preventing terrorist attacks in this country.

In his BreakPoint commentary titled "What's Hidden in the Shadows: Radical Islam and U.S. Prisons", Colson, who founded Prison Fellowship Ministries after serving time in prison for Watergate-related crimes and recently retired as its head, warned that a terrorist attack in the homeland could be spearheaded by "home-grown Islamist radicals" who are converting to Islam while in prison.

"I don't usually make predictions," Colson wrote, "but here's one Iâ€™™ venture: If, God forbid, an attack by home-grown Islamist radicals occurs on American soil, many, if not most, of the perpetrators will have converted to Islam while in prison."

He pointed to "Out of the Shadows: Getting Ahead of prisoner Radicalization", a report produced by researchers from George Washington University's Homeland Security Policy Institute and the University of Virginia's Critical Incident Analysis Group, that concluded that "the U.S....is at risk of facing the sort of homegrown terrorism currently plaguing other countries." The basis of that risk, is America's "large prison population."

According to the report, "With the world's largest prison population (over 2 million -- 93 percent of whom are in state and local prisons and jails) and highest incarceration rate (701 out of every 100,000), America faces what could be an enormous challenge -- every radicalized prisoner becomes a potential terrorist recruit."

"Radicalized prisoners" within this population "are a potential pool of recruits by terrorist groups," the study says. The report notes that the absence of "monitoring by authoritative Islamic chaplains" permits "materials that advocate violence [to infiltrate] the prison system undetected."

Some of the materials that the newly converted receive urge Muslim prisoners "to wage war against non-Muslims who have not submitted to Islamic rule." One former employee of an Islamist group told a Senate committee, "I know of only a few instances in which prisons rejected the literature we attempted to distribute--and it was never because of the literature's radicalism."

Senator Susan Collins (R-Maine) has called the situation "an emerging threat to our national security."

While not getting into it in any thorough way, the report also acknowledged the presence in prisons of right-wing homegrown extremists "which have an extensive history of terrorists attacks."

"Out of the Shadows" recommends the establishment of a "Commission to investigate this issue in depth." It calls for "an objective risk assessment...to better understand the nature of the threat," in order to "address this issue now, rather than [managing] a crisis later."

Although the report does not go into details regarding evangelical Christian-focused faith-based prison programs, Colson does. He said that he has been warning about the potential terrorist threat from Muslims radicalized while in prison since 2001. He believes that recent court decisions against his faith-based prison projects have exacerbated the problem, and that greater government support for Christian faith-based prison programs are the way to go.

Colson directly attacks groups that have opposed his InnerChange Freedom Initiative. "The largely unimpeded spread of radical Islam through our prisons coincides with increased opposition to the one really successful antidote--that is, the presence of Christianity," Colson wrote. "An obvious example is the lawsuit against our prison program in Iowa. Programs like ours are working. We have studies to prove it. And they are the best solution to the alienation and rage that fuels conversions to radical Islam, as well as gangs and other hate groups inside the prisons. Making it harder for organizations like Prison Fellowship to operate within prison walls leaves jihadists and other radical groups as the only game in town."

Colson singles out Barry Lynn, the executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, for special condemnation. "Unfortunately, opponents like...Lynn...are blind to this, which puts more than the program at risk--because, as we saw in the case of the shoe bomber, Richard Reid, groups that are now operating in the shadows of our prisons are a real danger to us."

"Colson's comments were astonishing," Lynn told me in a telephone interview. "When I read it I could hardly believe what I was reading."

"There literally appears to be no level that Charles Colson will not stoop to these days. In this political

climate, calling someone an aider and abettor of terrorism is the worst thing you can call somebody. He seems to have run out of any sensible arguments so he is turning to lies and character assassination."

Lynn is no stranger to vilification by conservative Christians. At this year's Value Voters Summit, both James Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family, and Tony Perkins, the head of the Family Research Council, "took shots at Americans United." The two leaders "grip[ed] about an AU project to send letters to houses of worship in 11 states targeted by the Religious Right, warning them that they could endanger their tax-exempt status if they endorse or oppose candidates for public office," Americans United's Jeremy Leaming reported.

The Rev. Herb Lusk "suggested that Lynn [who attended the Summit] should not be discussed further. 'The enemy is out there,' Lusk bellowed. 'We know who our enemy is. The more you call the enemy's name, the larger he becomes.'" Despite Lusk's suggestion, Pastor Rick Scarborough, the President of Vision America and a proponent of the so-called War on Christians, "blasted Lynn for opposing church-based politicking. For good measure, Scarborough called the separation of church and state a 'bald-faced lie.'"

Lynn, whose recently published book is titled "Piety & Politics: The Right-Wing Assault on Religious Freedom" (Random House, 2006), thinks that Colson's playing of the terrorism card is clearly a sign of desperation.

"He realizes that his programs are on shaky ground because of the Iowa decision," Lynn pointed out. "He can't make a legal argument; in fact, in the 38 months during which the case was pending Prison Fellowship never presented the success of the InnerChange program because he did not want that evidence to be subject to cross examination by our side."

Colson's charge that opponents of his faith-based prison programs are enabling terrorism is "shocking, despicable and inflammatory" Annie Laurie Gaylor, the co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, an organization that has filed several suits against government sponsored faith-based programs, told me in an October telephone interview from San Francisco where her organization was holding its convention. "It's a gross insult to people who are opposed to Colson's faith-based programs to link them with terrorism."

Gaylor said that prisoners ought to have "compassion-based initiatives and not faith-based initiatives. The government should provide educational opportunities and job training programs so that prisoners can get decent paying jobs when they are released."

Colson's commentary also pointed to "studies" that "prove" that faith-based prison programs like his "are the

best solution to the alienation and rage that fuels conversions to radical Islam...inside the prisons." However, one of the key studies frequently referred to by Colson, and his organizational spokespersons, has been criticized for playing fast and loose with both its methodology and its conclusions, according to Claire Hughes a correspondent for The Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy.

In late August, Hughes wrote that "A study completed three years ago by the University of Pennsylvania Center for Research on Religion in Urban Civil Society on Prison Fellowship's InnerChange Freedom Initiative and touted by the Bush Administration showed that after two years out of prison, only eight percent of InnerChange graduates were re-incarcerated, compared to 20 percent of inmates in the general population. But," Hughes pointed out, "the study drew criticism for defining 'graduates' as those who had obtained jobs. When other program participants were included, the data, as reported in the studies, showed that InnerChange participants were more likely to be re-incarcerated than the general population of ex-prisoners."

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