

Institute on Religion and Democracy slams 'leftist' National Council of Churches

by Bill Berkowitz

New report from conservative IRD charges NCC with being a surrogate for MoveOn, People for the American Way and other liberal groups

If you prefer your religious battles sprinkled with demagoguery, sanctimoniousness, and simplistic attacks, the Institute on Religion and Democracy's (IRD) latest broadside against the National Council of Churches (NCC) certainly fits the bill.

For those who remember a similar IRD-led attack on the World Council of Churches two decades ago -- highlighted by a controversial and buzz-generating segment on CBS' "60 Minutes" -- the IRD's latest blast appears to be -- to borrow a phrase from New York Yankee great Yogi Berra -- "d@j vu all over again."

The IRD excoriated the World Council of Churches (WCC) for allegedly being tools of the anti-American left over its support of the Nelson Mandela-led African National Congress in South Africa, and its opposition to President Ronald Reagan's contra wars in Central America; wars that destabilized governments and were responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians. And now it is doing a similar job on the NCC.

"The institute, a Washington-based think tank, is allied with conservative groups on issues such as same-sex marriage. From its founding in 1981, its primary effort has been to challenge what it calls the 'leftist' political positions of mainline Protestant denominations, such as the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)," the Washington Post recently reported.

Author and longtime right wing watcher Frederick Clarkson recently described the IRD as an "inside the beltway, neoconservative agency [that] has waged a war of attrition against the historic mainline protestant churches in the U.S." Clarkson pointed out that the IRD "and its satellite groups have spent millions of dollars to destabilize and even dismember these churches like they were a third world country whose government was disliked by the United States." The organization "has been bankrolled by the leading strategic funders of the conservative movement and the religious right such as Richard Mellon Scaife and Howard Ahmanson, and cheer-led by the Washington Times newspaper, which is owned, controlled and bankrolled by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church.

NCC 'construct[ing] a Religious Left' charges IRD vice president

"Strange Yokefellows: The National Council of Churches and its Growing Non-Church Constituency" a new 90-page report based on two years of research by IRD vice president Alan Wisdom and IRD Research

Associate John Lomperis, "found that the mostly liberal foundations are donating as much if not more than the member churches that the NCC is supposed to be representing," according to an IRD press release dated January 10.

Wisdom pointed out that the NCC, a New York-based alliance of 35 Christian denominations, and its "yokefellows" are trying "to construct a Religious Left that will be a counterweight to the much-reviled Religious Right. Bob Edgar [a former Democratic congressman from Pennsylvania who is also a Methodist minister and who is the NCC's general secretary], in his recent book, tries to identify the NCC with 'Middle Church'; however, the political stands that he takes on behalf of 45 million claimed constituents fall almost uniformly left of center."

The IRD vice president charged that the NCC's membership is "shrinking" and "no longer able or willing to bear the financial load" of the NCC organization. That has forced the NCC into an unholy alliance with "non-church givers with political agendas [that] have stepped in to save the council. And, in preserving and strengthening the NCC, they help to project an exaggerated image of the Religious Left -- beyond what the NCC's or any other constituency could justify. The Religious Left simply does not have anywhere near 45 million people in the pews on any given Sunday."

"Bob Edgar has declared his personal support for same-sex marriage. He and other NCC leaders repeatedly criticize fellow Christians who defend the traditional definition of marriage. In thus fostering the impression of an evenly split U.S. Christian community, the NCC serves the interests of its 'progressive' yokefellows who are campaigning for the legitimization of same-sex marriage," Wisdom said.

In his statement, Lomperis, a former Bush-Cheney campaign volunteer, maintained that "the groups funding the NCC have very little demonstrated interest in religion beyond recruiting faith communities to support their favored social and political causes."

Twenty-five years of supporting right wing politics

The IRD is celebrating 25 years "of working to reform the social and political witness of American churches, while promoting democracy and religious freedom at home and abroad," Rev. James Tonkovich, the organization's president writes on its website. According to Clarkson, a co-founder of Talk to Action, a website that tracks the religious right, Tonkovich "is a member of a schismatic Presbyterian denomination that split from mainline Presbyterianism in 1973. Tonkovich's small splinter denomination, among other things, does not believe in the ordination of women."

As Andrew Weaver has pointed out at Media Transparency, "Six of the 17 current members of IRD's board of directors, a full 35 percent, are prominent conservative Catholics...Few people realize that these Catholics direct a group of paid political operatives who work ceaselessly to discredit mainline Protestant leaders and

their Christian communions...have built and sustained an organization that has consistently labored to generate suspicion and hostility about mainstream Protestant leaders, not a penny has been spent nor staff member assigned to attempt to change anything about the Catholic Church. This conduct constitutes the single greatest breach in ecumenical good will between Roman Catholics and Protestants since Vatican II."

The IRD was founded in 1981 by Michael Novak, the long-time conservative Catholic scholar affiliated with the American Enterprise Institute, Richard Neuhaus, the founder of Institute on Religion and Public Life who at the time of the IRD's founding was associated with the Ethics and Public Policy Center, and Penn Kemble, one of the leaders of the right-wing Social Democrats/USA. The project began as an offshoot of the Foundation for Democratic Education, the financial arm of the cold war group, the Coalition for a Democratic Majority.

According to a June 2004 profile by Right Web, the IRD has consistently "advocated U.S. military interventionism." It supported, and "attempted to rally" U.S. Christians "around a program of higher military budgets and military campaigns against the Soviet Union and allied countries such as Nicaragua, Angola, and Cuba" The organization "routinely challenged the patriotism and the belief systems of Christians who didn't share its militarism and interventionist spirit."

Right Web pointed out that while liberation theology in Latin America is no longer considered a major threat, the organization "has maintained its assault on what it calls the 'liberal' leadership of the mainstream churches while at the same time speaking out for the neoconservative foreign policy agenda. Its mission of 'reforming the Church's social and political witness, and building and strengthening democracy and religious liberty at home and abroad' has over the past two decades closely followed the evolving neoconservative foreign policy agenda -- from militant anticommunism to post-cold war American global supremacy."

Supporting the president's war on Iraq

During the run up to President Bush's war on Iraq, IRDers criticized anti-war mainstream Christians that "spout pacifist-sounding slogans" rather than concentrating on "biblical and confessional teachings." Right Web also noted that "since the Iraq invasion, IRD has focused its Christian wrath and fear-mongering on Iran, Cuba, Sudan, and China."

In a news release dated October 10, 2002 -- in conjunction with the release of a report titled "Discernment Needed: What Mainstream Christians Know and Don't Know about Possible War with Iraq" -- the late Diane Knippers, then president of the IRD, said that mainline Protestant clergy who question the need to counter Saddam Hussein's Iraqi regime "are wrong to speak on matters about which they lack the information and competence." Knippers said that "grave" decisions" about war "must finally be made by government and military leaders within their spheres of competence and authority."

Alan Wisdom, who authored that report as well, described Hussein as "a tyrant in the classic sense of the term, a man who has usurped power and used it to oppress his own people. His power has no legitimacy under either democratic theory or Christian morality. The presumption of 'sovereign immunity' against foreign intervention should not be used to shield such a tyrant from all accountability."

A Baptist Press story pointed out that the document "criticizes left-leaning Protestant leaders who 'seem quite certain that there can be no justification for any military action against Iraq, under any conceivable circumstances.'"

"Many mainline pastors are preaching their own 'personal political opinions' rather than relying on 'biblical and confessional teachings,' the report charges. Many pastors are spouting 'pacifist-sounding slogans without clarifying that their denominations are not pacifist' -- slogans which 'ignore or minimize the threat posed by the Iraqi government.'"

In a recent commentary about the IRD report on the NCC, the Rev. Chuck Currie, a United Church of Christ minister, wrote that the organization "has long opposed positions taken by the NCC on issues ranging from anti-poverty efforts (IRD promotes policies that benefit the wealthy at the expense of the 'least of these' in society) to issues around war and peace (IRD strongly advocates the use of U.S. military force to resolve nearly all international disputes.)"

"Strange Yokefellows" maintains that the NCC has aligned itself with leftist political organizations such as MoveOn.org and People for the American Way to combat and "defeat the alleged totalitarian ambitions of a right-wing conspiracy involving President Bush, Rush Limbaugh, James Dobson, and the IRD, among others."

During the 1980s and nineties the NCC experienced financial difficulties as contributions from many of the churches of its 35 member denominations dwindled. Gifts to the NCC declined from \$2.9 million in the 2000-2001 fiscal year to \$1.78 million in the 2004-2005 fiscal year -- a drop of 40 percent -- according to the IRD report.

But after Bob Edgar took over in 2000, he cutback overall expenses and staff, and sought out new non-church funding sources: \$2.9 million came from foundations and non-church groups in 2004-2005. Edgar told Baptist Press in an interview that the organization's financial reserves had increased from \$2 million to \$10 million under his leadership and that the organization has operated with a balanced budget for the past five years.

A Washington Post story about the IRD-organized Washington press conference announcing the report's findings noted that IRD spokespersons were asked about its funding base. "James Tonkovich, the institute's president, said that about 60 percent of its roughly \$1 million in annual revenue comes from individual donors

and about 40 percent from conservative foundations, such as the Scaife, Bradley, Coors and Smith Richardson family charities." Tonkowich also "acknowledged that his organization has made public less information about its funders than the NCC has."

"I am delighted that the IRD has validated what I was called to the National Council of Churches to do, and that is to raise money and raise money," Edgar told Baptist Press. "I am also delighted that the IRD admitted that it, too, receives 40 percent of its funding from foundations, albeit conservative foundations."

IRD's broadside against the NCC comes at a time when some conservative Christian evangelical groups are shifting their focus from the so-called "family values" issues of abortion and same-sex marriage to a broader more mainstream agenda that includes combating poverty and AIDS in Africa, issues fully embraced by the NCC.

The IRD has obviously not gotten the memo.

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