Conversation on sin: Top religion stories of 1998

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Sin, contrition, repentance and forgiveness--such biblical themes were staples of talk shows, editorial pages and everyday conversations in 1998. That much, at least, could be said for the nation's yearlong preoccupation with President Bill Clinton's sexual escapades, his delayed and halting confession, and his eventual impeachment for lying and for obstructing the federal investigation of his affair with Monica Lewinsky. Everyone became a moral theologian.

Much of the discussion in religious circles focused on Clinton's own use of the language of judgment and grace in a September speech to religious leaders at the National Prayer Breakfast. After months of denying and evading charges, he spoke of his "sin," of his need for a "broken spirit" and about his commitment to stay on the "path of repentance." He also announced that he had enlisted three clergymen to help him stay on the path. Was this a sign of genuine repentance or one more shameless political strategy? Who should judge? Perhaps more important: What difference would personal repentance, genuine or not, make in assessing the appropriate legal and political consequences for the president?

Though theologians, ethicists and pastors did not hesitate to try to parse the personal, legal, political and public dimensions of Clinton's actions, moral discourse was not greatly elevated or political wisdom widely clarified by the outpouring of opinions. Despite the gravity of the impeachment proceedings, the saga of Clinton and his critics kept veering from high drama to sexual farce. Henry Hyde (R., Ill.), chair of the House Judiciary Committee, was forced to acknowledge an earlier sexual "indiscretion" of his own, and Representative Robert Livingston (R., La.) passed up a chance to be Speaker of the House after he learned that *Hustler* magazine was ready to reveal his extramarital affairs.

Far more serious politically than such individual failings is the political culture that gives reports from Hustler moral authority. In the name of reform, politics has

become less civil and more preoccupied with partisanship and prosecution. As political analyst Joe Klein has pointed out, "Contentiousness and partisan legal harassment have become industries in Washington, providing crude entertainment and satisfying careers for thousands of shortsighted practitioners." The groundwork for the investigation of Clinton's sexual affair was set, Klein argues, in the Carter and Reagan years through many congressionally sponsored investigations of government officials on trivial legal charges. The partisan fever was raised with the forced resignation of Jim Wright as speaker of the House and the ideologically charged confirmation hearings of John Tower, Robert Bork and Clarence Thomas. The question is whether the politicians--and the media--can restore a sense of proportion to the practice of politics.

Homosexuality and the church

In the churches, the debate over homosexuality reached new levels of intensity and contentiousness. Although a dozen or so denominations wrestled with such issues as same-sex unions and ordination of gays and lesbians, the most prominent dispute over homosexuality took place among United Methodists. In March a church court narrowly acquitted pastor Jimmy Creech of violating a denominational directive by presiding over a union ceremony involving two women at his Omaha church. In August, however, the UMC's highest court reaffirmed the denomination's stand against same-sex unions. "Conduct in violation of this prohibition renders a pastor liable to a charge of disobedience to the order and discipline of the United Methodist Church," the Judicial Council held. And Creech began a voluntary leave of absence from the ministry.

UMC traditionalists were delighted with the council's ruling, but Gregory Dell, pastor of Chicago's Broadway United Methodist Church, is defying it. Coordinator of In All Things Charity, a movement within the church that supports same-sex unions, Dell performed such a union between two men in September. He says his ordination vow to minister to all people supersedes the UMC ban on homosexual unions. His bishop, Joseph Sprague, actually agrees with Dell's position but felt duty bound to file a complaint against him. Dell will be brought to trial later this year. In October a group of 363 UMC clergy and laity, in an open letter to their bishops, urged that the denomination's ban on same-sex ceremonies be overturned.

In the summer a coalition of conservative religious groups launched an ad campaign backing "ex-gay" ministries that claim to be able to transform homosexuals into

heterosexuals. Liberals, arguing that gays and lesbians should be accepted as they are, viewed the conservatives' ads as contributing to a climate of hatred and fear. At its December meeting in Denver, the board of the American Psychiatric Association unanimously voted to condemn any psychiatric treatments that attempt to change a person's sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual.

The brutal slaying on October 12 of Matthew Shepard, a gay student at the University of Wyoming, had a significant impact on the national consciousness, evoking considerable commentary and prompting rallies in unexpected places--as well as one on the steps of the capitol in Washington at which several members of Congress spoke. Shepard's death seemed to put a damper, at least briefly, on the antigay rhetoric of the Religious Right--except for extremists like Topeka minister Fred Phelps. Phelps and his cohorts picketed Shepard's funeral in Casper, carrying signs with such slogans as "Matt in Hell" and "No Tears for Queers" (Phelps also picketed Gregory Dell's church in Chicago). Some observers maintained that the murder of Shepard had a subtle influence on the November 3 elections. But whether it brings about federal hate-crime legislation remains to be seen.

Religious persecution

Efforts by Christian activists and human rights groups to draw attention to religious persecution culminated in a legislative victory: the International Religious Freedom Act, a bill approved by Congress in October and backed by virtually all evangelical and mainline Christian groups and by the American Jewish Committee. The bill calls on the State Department to review each country's record on religious liberty and requires the president to take action against offending nations, possibly including sanctions.

Though the debate in Congress drew attention to the ways people are tortured, imprisoned or discriminated against for their faith in places such as the Sudan, Pakistan, China and Indonesia, it also revealed that taking action against religious persecution is diplomatically and politically complex. For one thing, acts of religious persecution are usually entangled with racial, ethnic, economic and political conflicts. In the Sudan, for example, where chemical and biological warfare is being used against Christians by the fundamentalist Islamic regime, the Khartoum government is seeking both to subdue political resistance and to exploit the oil reserves in the southern part of the country, where most Christians live.

Further complicating matters is the fact that the Christian minority in some countries (Egypt is an example) is not eager for American support. By linking Christians to the U.S. and the West (and to U.S. foreign-policy aims), such support may exacerbate existing tensions and further isolate the Christian community.

Finally, it is often difficult to get reliable or balanced information on the plight of Christians. Religious life in China, for example, often cited for its tight restrictions, varies greatly from province to province. A three-person U.S. religious delegation to China came back expressing guarded optimism about the future of religion there, but was promptly criticized by some Americans and some expatriate Chinese for having been duped by Chinese officials. Meanwhile, some Chinese say that their religious freedom has never been greater than it is now. Clearly, the effective implementation of the Religious Freedom Act will require judicious diplomacy and savvy politics.

The ethics of intervention

The brutal and menacing acts of dictators held the world's attention in 1998, and sharpened the moral question of international intervention. In the post-cold-war world, what is the international community obliged to do when a nation is posing a significant threat not only to its neighbors, but to the citizens within its borders?

In Iraq Saddam Hussein continued to defy the United Nations and renege on promises, thwarting UN investigators' efforts to determine the status of Iraq's weapons program. On two occasions the U.S. and its allies wound up to strike Iraq militarily, only to pull back at the last moment.

Just as important, in the face of Iraq's noncompliance the UN maintained heavy sanctions on the country that have exacted a harsh toll in human lives and suffering. Who is responsible for the pain of sanctions? The UN says Saddam Hussein has only to comply and sanctions will be lifted immediately. In the meantime, average Iraqis live without basic necessities--clean water, food and medicine. And though Saddam Hussein balks at having photographs taken of his presidential palaces, he welcomes every roll of film shot in Baghdad hospitals. The Iraqi dictator has succeeded in turning the sanctions into a major propaganda victory.

In November the outgoing president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement about the moral dimensions of the Iraq sanctions. "The international community should not resort to means which effectively punish the

Iraqi people for the actions of an authoritarian regime over which they have no control," said Bishop Anthony M. Pilla of Cleveland. Pilla added that "the Iraqi government has a duty to stop its internal repression, to end its threat to peace, to abandon its efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction, and to respect the legitimate role of the United Nations in ensuring that it does so."

In December, after Iraq once again stymied the work of UN arms inspectors, the U.S. and Britain could think of no more creative solution to the continuing problems than bombing, but the recent military actions over Iraq seemed to have solved the inspection problem only by canceling it. When in doubt, bomb, the saying goes. But bombing Iraq relieved none of the doubts about Saddam Hussein--about his intentions, his military capabilities, his political future. And the sanctions--morally as murky as the drinking water in Baghdad--remain fully in place.

Meanwhile, a threat of military intervention dissuaded Slobodan Milosovic from pursuing a murderous policy of repression against ethnic Albanians in Serbia's Kosovo province. It also nudged him into agreeing to allow international observers into the region to monitor the stand-off. But Milosovic's harsh actions in the area over the past decade have succeeded in radicalizing Kosovars to the point that they seem intent upon independence. The rebel Kosovo Liberation Army has taken advantage of the Serbian withdrawal to solidify and expand its hold over areas of Kosovo, and has continued to press its military campaign against Serb forces. The KLA's escalating military action has significantly altered the moral question of intervention. Now international monitors increasingly find themselves in the position of observing not a tenuous cease fire, but an ever-expanding civil war.

Move toward peace in Northern Ireland

An historic peace agreement was hammered out in Northern Ireland in 1998, after generations of bloodshed which include the past 30 years of violence known as "the Troubles"--a period in which over 3,200 persons lost their lives largely through acts of terrorism. The groundbreaking pact was struck on Good Friday, April 10, 17 hours after the deadline for negotiations had passed. It was ratified by a May 22 referendum when 71.1 percent of voters said an enthusiastic yes to the agreement.

Two of the principle figures in the negotiations, David Trimble, head of the largely Protestant Ulster Unionist Party, and John Hume, who heads the Catholic Social Democratic and Labor Party, were jointly awarded the Noble Peace Prize for their

efforts, but as many observers noted, the prize was awarded as much for the intention to achieve peace nonviolently as for the attainment of such a peace.

The tenuousness of the accord become apparent quickly. On July 12 three Catholic boys, aged 11, nine and eight, were burned to death in their beds when their home in Ballymoney, north of Portadown, was fire bombed.

Then on August 15 a bombing in Omagh took the lives of 28 people, including seven children and 14 women. Church leaders around the world pleaded that the violence not be allowed to kill the peace process. Konrad Raiser, general secretary of the World Council of Churches, and Keith Clements, general secretary of the Conference of European Churches, said in a joint statement that the Omagh bombing was carried out by persons who "realize their aims and methods have been decisively rejected by the majority of people in Ireland, including the political leadership of all communities and allegiances."

By the time Trimble and Hume picked up their Nobel awards in Oslo on December 10, the peace process had ground pretty much to a halt. The two men expressed differences on the details of disarming the paramilitary groups on both sides, and key provisions of the April 10 agreement remain unfulfilled. Hume pointed to one reason for optimism when he said that the "real issue about guns and arms is that they have been totally silent." That silence will prove to be only a brief interlude, others fear, unless obstacles that hinder the peace process can be overcome quickly.

The Orthodox churches and the WCC

Both the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Georgian Orthodox Church suspended relations with the World Council of Churches in 1998, and other Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox churches declared their dissatisfaction with aspects of the WCC. Though fears of further Orthodox defections were eased at the WCC's assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe, which called for a special commission to evaluate the terms of Orthodox participation, the future of Orthodox-WCC relations remains clouded.

The Orthodox concerns are fueled in part by some WCC members' emphasis on certain issues--such as abortion, homosexuality, inclusive language and feminist theology--which are theologically troubling for the Orthodox. The criticisms also reflect internal Orthodox tensions that have emerged since the fall of communism.

During the cold war, the WCC offered Orthodox Christians in the Eastern bloc the opportunity for contacts with and support from the West. But as new freedoms in these countries have been accompanied by economic crises and social dislocations, many Orthodox believers have become suspicious of the West, especially of those who come as "proselytizers" for non-Orthodox brands of the faith.

Beneath these issues, however, is a deeper disagreement about the nature of the ecumenical project. When Western Protestants talk of the unity of the church, they tend to have in mind a spiritual unity that transcends but does not erase dogmatic, moral and ecclesial divisions. For the Orthodox, on the other hand, the unity of the church is a concrete goal that entails the erasure of such divisions and a common agreement on doctrines, teaching and authority.

Speaking to the WCC assembly, Leonid Kishkovsky of the Orthodox Church in America pointed out an obvious but perhaps insufficiently appreciated reality: "The churches of the Christian East are not part of the story of the Reformation. . . . The theological debates and presuppositions of the Reformation are not ours." For this reason alone, the Orthodox churches are indispensable partners in the ecumenical conversation.

Controversy and conflict in the SBC

Again this year the Southern Baptist Convention, the nation's largest Protestant denomination, figured in the news in a prominent and often controversial way. At its June annual meeting, held in Salt Lake City, 8,200 messengers (delegates) overwhelmingly endorsed a statement on the family that affirmed not only their support for heterosexual marriage but also their belief that the Bible says wives should "submit . . . graciously" to the leadership of their husbands. Now officially the 18th article of the SBC's confession of faith, known as the Baptist Faith and Message, the statement on the family is being used as a kind of litmus test of loyalty and orthodoxy; adherence to the amended confession has become a requirement for employment in SBC agencies and institutions.

The spousal-submission article prompted some moderate churches--such as First Baptist Church of Raleigh, North Carolina--to sever all ties with the Southern Baptist Convention. But the most significant development took place in Texas. The Baptist General Convention of Texas--with annual contributions to the SBC of around $43 million--is the largest state convention in the denomination. This year the state

organization voted to amend its constitution in order to give itself more autonomy and to distance itself from the national SBC. Defying the SBC, it also passed a resolution declaring that men and women have "biblical equality" in the family relationship. Then came the split, with a group of SBC loyalists announcing that they were pulling out of the official state convention to form an organization of their own. Called the Southern Baptists of Texas, the new group represents about 180 churches of the approximately 5,700 Southern Baptist congregations in Texas. Its members consider themselves "the real Texas Baptists," said its budget chairman.

While challenging the conservative domination of the SBC, the Baptist General Convention of Texas has not chosen to throw its support exclusively to the SBC dissident movement known as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Some Texas moderates are urging a complete break with the SBC and the formation of an entirely new Baptist denomination.

John Paul II goes to Cuba

In the U.S. media, the story of Pope John Paul II's historic January visit to Cuba was forced to play second fiddle to the initial news of the Clinton-Lewinsky sex scandal. The encounter between John Paul and Fidel Castro was less confrontational than some pundits had predicted, and the consensus among observers was that the visit proved to be a boon to both Cuba's aging communist president and the Catholic Church's aging anticommunist pontiff, with each making use of the other to advance his own goals. In his welcoming speech Castro did sound off against everything from the Crusades and the Inquisition to the church-approved Spanish Conquest. But he also praised the Second Vatican Council--and the pope, to whom he showed almost obsequious respect. Having lost its economic benefactor, the now-collapsed Soviet Union, Cuba is in rather desperate straits these days. Allowing John Paul to visit, conduct four open-air masses and speak uncensored on state-run television was part of a shift in strategy that includes the normalization of church-state relations, along with a search for new diplomatic and trade relations.

Castro obviously sought--and at least in some quarters gained--greater legitimacy from this first-ever papal sojourn in Cuba. But he also benefited from it in other ways. In almost every speech John Paul denounced the U.S. embargo; he termed it "unjust and ethically unacceptable" and, in his farewell address, "oppressive," causing an "imposed isolation" that makes it "ever more difficult for the weakest to enjoy the bare essentials." And while he criticized communism, he criticized

capitalism just as strongly, especially the neoliberal variety that "subordinates the human person to blind market forces" and ensures that the "the wealthy grow ever wealthier while the poor grow ever poorer." The pope also called on Cuban exiles to eschew "useless confrontation" and practice "a generous solidarity with their Cuban brothers."

Apart from condemning the embargo--and making a general plea for greater freedom--John Paul downplayed politics and emphasized pastoral and moral concerns. But some of the concessions won by the pope have political implications. Not long before his visit Cuba had about 1,000 political prisoners; now there are between 300 and 400, according to prominent dissident Elizardo Sánchez Santa Cruz. Sánchez can now contact international human rights groups without interference, and recently he was allowed to travel abroad. The reduced level of repression has also benefited the church. For example, a number of priests and nuns have been granted entry into the country. Also, permits are being given for the repair of old churches.

Wye accord in shambles

Middle east peace is a resolution wrapped in an accord wrapped in an agreement. And the package is coming thoroughly undone. The disintegration of the Wye agreement between Israel and the Palestine Authority was yet another disappointment in a peace process which continues to spiral downward, driven by a bitterly contested political conflict that threatens to erupt into violence at any moment. The peace process that started with such optimism at Camp David, was given new life with an agreement at Oslo and was then renewed again at Wye, appears to be going nowhere.

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu returned from the U.S.-brokered meeting in Maryland to face his own rebellious Likud Party, increasingly dominated by intransigent settlers living on occupied Palestinian territory. Almost before the ink dried on the document, Netanyahu began to add further stipulations that Palestinians must meet before the Wye pact can be implemented. Despite his maneuvering, however, the extreme right wing in Israel continued to oppose any measure that would return occupied land to Palestinians. To avoid a vote of no confidence in his leadership, Netanyahu called elections for May 17, a date that falls less than two weeks after the May 4 date on which Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat has threatened to unilaterally declare the formation of a Palestinian state, in keeping

with the Oslo Accords timetable.

Israel will choose a new Knesset and prime minister in an election that could determine if the peace process has any hope for survival. A centrist Israeli party promises to push for greater accommodation with Arafat, who faces his own internal political unrest from the militant Hamas organization, which celebrated its 11th anniversary this year. Meanwhile, the gap widens between Israelis and Palestinians as the U.S. promises to fund highways to connect Jewish settlements in the occupied territories, further isolating Palestinian areas, and the Israeli foreign minister calls for settlers to "grab more hills" from Palestinians.

Ecumenical agreements

After three decades of discussion, Roman Catholic and Lutheran theologians hammered out a joint statement on justification by faith that would serve to lift the mutual anathemas that Lutherans and Catholics hurled at each other in the Reformation era. Plans for a mutual signing ceremony were put on hold, however, when the Vatican issued some last-minute "clarifications" of the document.

The document represents a particular strategy for forging ecumenical agreement: each tradition maintains its particular emphases and language, but affirms points of agreement. In this case, regarding Christian understanding of God's saving actions, Lutherans continue to refer to the believer as simultaneously saint and sinner while Catholics stress the renewal of the believer through sanctification, yet the two parties agree on the primacy of God's grace in the work of salvation.

The full communion between Lutheran and Reformed churches in the U.S., voted on in 1997, was celebrated offically for the first time in an October service in Chicago. The service brought together the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America with three churches in the Reformed tradition--the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America and the United Church of Christ.

Meanwhile, the ELCA prepared a revised version of a concordat with the Episcopal Church. The pact failed to win approval from the ELCA in 1997 because of resistance to the idea of embracing the historic episcopate as understood in the Anglican tradition. Martin Marty, who chaired the panel that prepared a revised proposal, said the new draft emphasizes the ministry of all the baptized and stresses that the historic episcopate is not of the essence of the church's life, though it is "a sign of the unity and continuity of the church." The ELCA's churchwide council approved the

draft, which will be considered by the churchwide assembly in 1999.

And in other stories . . .

Oregon reported its first cases of physician-assisted suicide in March, an act made legal in that state following a 1997 referendum. Jack Kevorkian's video of a suicide was aired on CBS's *Sixty Minutes*, and Kevorkian was later charged with murder for assisting in the suicide. Proponents of school vouchers were encouraged by two court decisions--one by the Wisconsin Supreme Court, which upheld the legality of a Milwaukee program that allows state-sponsored vouchers to be used at religious schools, the other by the U.S. Supreme Court, which refused to review the Wisconsin court's decision. The murder of Dr. Barnett Slepian, who worked in a health clinic in Amherst, New York, was attributed to antiabortion activists. A clinic in Birmingham, Alabama, where abortions are performed was bombed, killing a security guard. Karla Faye Tucker, convicted murderer and born-again Christian, was put to death in Texas despite pleas from televangelist Pat Robertson and Pope John Paul II. Though he acknowledged an "inappropriate relationship" with a female employee of the church and faced state and federal charges regarding misuse of the denomination's money, Henry Lyons, president of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc., said he would stand for reelection.

Deaths: John M. Allin, former Episcopal presiding bishop; Raymond E. Brown, Catholic Bible scholar; Cardinal Agostino Casaroli, former Vatican secretary of state; A. Roy Eckardt, scholar of Christian-Jewish relations; Edward Flannery, pioneer in Catholic-Jewish relations; Catholic Bishop Juan José Gerardi, champion of human rights murdered in Guatemala; Bernard Häring, Catholic moral theologian; Martin J. Heinecken, Lutheran theologian; Trevor Huddleston, Anglican archbishop and antiapartheid leader; Thomas Kilgore, leader in both the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. and the Progressive National Baptist Convention; Harold Lindsell, *Christianity Today* editor; Maurice F. McCrackin, peace activist pastor defrocked but later reinstated by the Presbyterians; Lesslie Newbigin, senior statesman of the ecumenical movement; Ronald E. Osborn, Disciples historian and ecumenist; Archbishop Seraphim, longtime head of the Orthodox Church in Greece; Paul van Buren, theologian.

Some notable books: *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, by Kathleen Norris (Riverhead); *Belief in God in an Age of Science,* by John Polkinghorne (Yale University Press); *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity,* by Miroslav Volf (Eerdmans); *Things Seen and Unseen: A Year Lived in Faith,* by Nora Gallagher

(Knopf); *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics*, by Hans Küng (Oxford University Press).