

Anti-conversion law would complicate Sri Lanka relief efforts by Evangelicals_41805

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Anti-conversion law would complicate Sri Lanka relief efforts by Evangelicals

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP)—The Sri Lankan government appears poised to vote on anti-conversion legislation this month, according to a number of media reports.

If approved, the vote would cap a three-year effort by Buddhist leaders to stem the tide of rural Buddhists turning to evangelical Christianity. If passed, the bill would bring Christian-oriented humanitarian aid groups under additional scrutiny.

Although the Sri Lankan constitution guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion, it also assures that Buddhism will hold the “foremost place.”

About 70 percent of Sri Lanka’s 18.5 million people are Buddhist, with higher concentrations in the Sinhalese-dominated southern and western parts of the country. About 15 percent are Hindu, which is more predominant in the north and east. Adherents to Islam make up about 7 percent of the population, with Christians accounting for 8 percent. An estimated 90 percent of the Christian population is Roman Catholic, with the remainder divided mainly among several evangelical groups.

In 2002, Buddhist leaders called for a special Buddha Sasana Commission to address the decline of Buddhism and the growth of Christian churches in rural areas. Members of the commission devised a “clear strategy to suppress the growth of Christianity and stir up popular opposition to the Christian faith,” according to Compass Direct, a group that tracks religious persecution.

In 2004, a fact-finding team from the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty documented more than 160 incidents of violence and intimidation against religious minorities, including dozens of church burnings and desecrations. Similar figures have been reported by the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka and by other watchdog groups.

Parliamentary elections held in April 2004 resulted in strong gains for the Jathika Hela Urumaya, a Buddhist political party. The JHU quickly proposed a Bill for the Prohibition of Forcible Conversion, interpreting any kind of “allurement” toward Christianity as a forcible conversion. In August, the Sri Lankan Supreme Court ruled two sections of the bill to be in violation of the constitution's religious freedom guarantees, but the bill could be amended and remains under discussion.

In addition, the nation's minister of Buddhist affairs, Ratnasiri Wickremanayake, has filed a second and more restrictive bill, the Act for the Protection of Religious Freedom. Wickremanayake's bill was endorsed by the Sri Lankan Cabinet last summer and would forbid anyone to “attempt to convert or aid or abet acts of conversion of a person to a different religion.”

Offenders could be subject to a fine of 100,000 Sri Lankan rupees (about \$1,000) and a prison term of up to five years. If the conversion involves a minor, the penalty rises to 500,000 rupees and up to seven years in prison.

Other proposed legislation would establish local “Sanghadikarana”

tribunals, where Buddhist monks would preside without the involvement of legal authorities. Though touted as a convenient way to resolve village disputes, advocates for religious freedom fear the local tribunals would provide a legal venue for religious persecution and discrimination against minority groups.

Buddhist activists routinely have accused evangelicals of coercing poor people to convert by promising money or jobs, especially in rural areas. As a result, passage of the act could severely hamper Christian relief work in the wake of the tsunami that ravaged the country Dec. 26, 2004. Religious freedom advocates fear that the bill could be interpreted to view the charitable efforts of Christians as material enticements toward conversion. Thus, even those Christian organizations whose primary focus is humanitarian aid could still run afoul of the new law.

Critics of the act note that, if passed, it would put the country in violation of international human-rights agreements to which Sri Lanka is a signatory, leading to a possible economic backlash.

Godfrey Yogarajah, general secretary of the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka, recently charged that “the proposed law is in breach of Sri Lanka’s international obligations towards the protection of human rights under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The tarnishing of our nation's image as a human-rights violator will cause irreparable damage to our economy—a luxury that we can ill afford at this time of national crisis.”

Noting that the devastating tsunami struck indiscriminately across ethnic and religious lines, Yogarajah praised consequent relief efforts that also transcended traditional lines of division. He lamented, however, that “instead of seizing this opportunity to build unity among the communities ... our lawmakers are attempting to introduce short-sighted legislation that will divide society by promoting religious strife.”

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.

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Around the State_40405

April 8, 2005

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Around the State

A series of small-church pastors' forums have been set for coming weeks to allow pastors of smaller churches to express their views on a variety of issues, **Doug Evans**, pastor of First Church in Laguna Park, said. Upcoming meetings are slated for Rochelle Church in Rochelle from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m. April 23; Jonesboro Church in Jonesboro, April 28, 6:30 p.m.-9:30 p.m.; Granite Mountain Church in Marble Falls, April 29, 8:30 a.m.-11:30 a.m.; Williamson Association office, April 29, 6 p.m.-9 p.m.; Wayland Baptist University, May 13, 6:30 p.m.-9:30 p.m.; WBU-Amarillo, May 14, 8:30 a.m.-11:30 a.m; and WBU-Lubbock, May 14 1 p.m.-4 p.m. Call Evans at (254) 622-3226 for more information.

 Williamson Association will hold a marriage counseling workshop April 28 from 9 a.m. until noon. **Bruce Walker**, director of Intimate Life Enrichment Center, will be the instructor. The cost is \$25.



Students at Dallas Baptist University's Lab School, including kindergartener Brittany Hussey, participated in a Read for Relief Read-a-thon to benefit victims of the Dec. 26 tsunami that struck South Asia. The students were able to earn more than \$2,100 through their efforts.

✖ So Help Me God, an addiction ministries conference presented by the Texas Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition and the Addiction Ministry Coalition of the Greater Dallas Faith Community, will be held April 29 at Highland Park Methodist Church in Dallas. **John Pollard**, pastor of Richland Church in Richardson and a board member of Celebrate Recovery, is the keynote speaker for the conference, which will begin at 8:15 a.m. with a breakfast sponsored by Dallas Association and the Baptist General

Convention of Texas. Registration is \$35 per person prior to April 15 and \$40 thereafter. For more information, call (214) 920-1628, ext. 8901.

Alliance between evangelicals, Catholics among legacies of John Paul II's papacy_40405

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Alliance between evangelicals, Catholics among legacies of John Paul II's papacy

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) — The dynamic bishop from Krakow who became one of the 20th century's most towering figures departed earthly life April 2, but his legacy — including the special esteem in which many American evangelical Protestants held him and many of his teachings — lives on.

Perhaps the most prominent evidence of Pope John Paul II's special place in the hearts of evangelicals came in comments by the nation's most prominent evangelical, President Bush. "The Catholic Church has lost its

shepherd, the world has lost a champion of human freedom, and a good and faithful servant of God has been called home," Bush said, in a statement he issued shortly after Vatican officials announced the pontiff's death.

Pope John Paul II died April 2.
See related story John Paul II: A Baptist reflection by James Leo Garrett Jr.

Bush later attended a special memorial Mass at Washington's St. Matthew's Cathedral, located just a few blocks from the White House.

Bush has frequently made reference to the "culture of life," a phrase coined by John Paul II in his many writings on life-ethics issues. Bush has used them mainly in the context of discussing abortion, stem-cell research and euthanasia. He cited the term repeatedly in discussing the recent dispute over the fate of Terri Schiavo.

Indeed, many prominent evangelicals cited the pope's commitment to a pro-life ethic in reflections on his legacy.

"His passion brought leadership on many cultural issues, including

traditional marriage and the protection of unborn children. He also took a strong stance against embryonic stem cell research and human cloning," said Tony Perkins, president of the conservative Family Research Council, in a statement on John Paul II's death. "The pope must be recognized for his prolific writings, his gift for language, and his outspoken affirmation of life that we enjoy from our Creator, from conception to natural death."

Such effusive praise for a pope from conservative Protestants stands in stark contrast to the views of Catholicism in general — and the papacy in particular — many evangelical leaders expressed prior to John Paul II's election in 1978. Indeed, many conservative and fundamentalist Protestants led opposition to the election of President John F. Kennedy in 1960 because of Kennedy's Catholicism.

According to an expert on Catholicism, John Paul II's views on life-ethics issues as well as his attempts to reach across religious barriers contributed to the new attitudes toward him.

"I think this pope particularly had a clear concern to join in dialogue with people of other faiths, and we see that" in his actions, such as visiting synagogues and mosques and meeting with religious leaders wherever he went, said Joe Favazza, an ex-Catholic priest and professor of religious studies at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tenn.

Favazza also cited the pontiff's legendary charisma in explaining his good relations with many evangelical leaders.

"He could look you right in the eye, and he could be very personal with you, and you had to deal with this presence. And I think that's exactly what happened with a lot of the evangelical leaders," he said. "I think he was a man of great integrity, a man who both talked the talk and walked the walk. And I think that had a great effect on a lot of people who believed the Catholic Church prior to 1978 had less faith than rituals."

But, Favazza noted, for all their embracing of John Paul II's rhetoric on life ethics regarding abortion and euthanasia, the pope had a more strenuous standard in mind when he first penned the phrase.

"I think Bush and others in some ways tried to position themselves as friends of the pope or sympathetic to the pope by pushing these buttons, but John Paul's vision of the 'culture of life' extended beyond abortion to capital punishment, and from individual morality to corporate morality," he said. He noted that John Paul II, in his most recent visit with Bush, strongly criticized the war in Iraq. Bush and others have differed with the pope's teachings on capital punishment, contraception and economic issues.

Many evangelical and other conservative commentators have also praised John Paul II for his role in helping bring an end to communist rule in Eastern Europe. In particular, they credit the pontiff for providing momentum to the "Solidarity" movement that ultimately brought an end to Soviet domination over his native Poland in the early 1980s.

"Evangelical Christians should honor the courage of this man and his historic role in bringing communist tyranny to an end — at least within the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe," wrote Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, in an April 4 column published by the Southern Baptist Convention's news service.

However, as Favazza and other observers of his papacy have pointed out, John Paul II in later years also strongly criticized the excesses of unrestrained capitalism.

More moderate religious leaders have praised John Paul II for his commitment to the poor. "His words and his actions- indeed, his very life — exemplified the authority of religion to resist captivity to politics and to transcend the interests of narrow nationalism in order to build a global community in which people live with mutuality, peace and freedom from

intolerance, prejudice and poverty," said Welton Gaddy, a Baptist minister who is president of the Interfaith Alliance, in a statement released April 4.

Roy Medley, general secretary of the American Baptist Churches, called John Paul II "a leading voice for the poor and disenfranchised throughout the world, and a strong advocate for peacemaking and for understanding among cultures and religions," according to the American Baptist News Service.

One value that the pope and evangelicals shared strongly was his advocacy for religious freedom — which included personal confrontations with some of the world's most oppressive dictators.

Favazza noted that John Paul II was one of the leading advocates for the strong statement on religious liberty adopted by the Second Vatican Council in 1962-63. Then, during his papacy, he "took the next step with that and said, first of all, we're going to challenge those leaders who need to be challenged [for violations of their people's religious freedom] and also admit there are times that the Catholic Church itself has transgressed this."

For example, John Paul II famously apologized for the Crusades and issued a statement stating that the Catholic Church did not place any blame on the Jewish people for Christ's death.

"He advanced, I guess, the tradition on religious liberty that was well articulated in the Second Vatican Council," Favazza said.

Nonetheless, some conservative evangelicals did note that fundamental differences between Protestants and Catholics remain, particularly over the role of the papacy itself.

"In the end, evangelicals should be thankful for the personal virtues Pope John Paul II demonstrated, and for his advocacy on behalf of life, liberty and human dignity. Yet we cannot ignore the institution of the papacy

itself, nor the complex of doctrines, truth claims and false doctrines that John Paul II taught, defended and promulgated," Mohler wrote, singling out the pope's teachings on justification by faith and his devotion to particular Catholic doctrines about Mary, the mother of Jesus, whom the pope labeled "co-redemptrix" with Christ.

But Favazza said that in itself was significant — that John Paul II could maintain strict devotion to distinctive Catholic positions while still reaching out to many who had previously been very alienated from the papacy.

"As much as he was concerned with dialogue and relations with other denominations, he was still very clear about the boundaries of the Catholic faith," Favazza said. "So, he will be remembered for many things, but compromise will not be one of them."

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.

John Paul II: A Baptist reflection by James Leo Garrett Jr._40405

April 8, 2005

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John Paul II: A Baptist reflection

By James Leo Garrett Jr.

FORT WORTH, Texas (SWBTS) — John Paul's 26-year pontificate, the third longest in history, we are told, will be remembered for much more than its longevity. Its impact both on the Roman Catholic Church and on the international community will be examined and pondered for decades to come.

Karol Wojtyla of Poland was the first pope to give flesh-and-blood embodiment to the longtime papal title, "universal pastor." By his travels to more than a hundred nations and by his engagement with audiences and closeness to people, he actualized a global papacy, utilizing as well the various means of the new technological age.

BaptistWay Bible Series for April 17: Disobedience robs Christians of God's bounty_40405

April 8, 2005

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BaptistWay Bible Series for April 17

Disobedience robs Christians of God's bounty

Numbers 20:1-13

By Wayne Smith

First Baptist Church, Lamesa

LifeWay Family Bible Series for April 17: Guard your tongue for the gospel's sake_40405

April 8, 2005

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LifeWay Family Bible Series for April 17

Guard your tongue for the gospel's sake

James 3:1-12; 4:11-12; 5:12

By Mitch Randall

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for April 17: Leading others to see God is not always easy_40405

April 8, 2005

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LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for April 17

Leading others to see God is not always easy

Jeremiah 28

By Dennis Tucker

Truett Seminary, Waco

BWA leaders hear reports of church growth_40405

April 8, 2005

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BWA leaders hear reports of church growth

By Wendy Ryan

Baptist World Alliance

WASHINGTON, D.C.-Baptist leaders from around the world gave glowing accounts of church growth during a recent Baptist World Alliance executive committee meeting.

German Baptists emphasize cooperation_40405

April 8, 2005

Posted: 4/01/05

German Baptists emphasize cooperation

By John Hall

Texas Baptist Communications

DALLAS-The “richness of God” is shown through the cooperation of his people, German Baptist leaders said during a Baptist General Convention of Texas prayer meeting.

Teens & Sex_40405

April 8, 2005

Posted: 4/01/05

By Joe Westbury

Georgia Christian Index

ATLANTA (BP)-Whenever love is in the air, many youth these days are saying “not so fast.”



Photo by
Patrick
Dennis/The
Advocate
of Baton
Rouge/RNS

Teens looking for loopholes in all the wrong places_40405

April 8, 2005

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Teens looking for loopholes in all the wrong places

By George Henson

Staff Writer

Youth ministers and parents need to close the loophole teenagers have conjured up for themselves in sexual abstinence pledges by speaking frankly about oral sex, counselor Carrie Beaird said.