Welcome to the Religion and Culture Web Forum's public discussion board for June 2007. In this thread you will find the invited responses from Mark Hulsether and Eugene McCarraher.

To leave your own response to Mark Toulouse's essay or to another posting, choose "post reply." In order to submit a comment, you must register with a personal user ID and password.

Debra Erickson
Editor, Religion and Culture Web Forum

Mark Toulouse argues that by the 1970s “trust in American institutions dissipated” as an “option truly available to thoughtful Christians.” Even the generally pro-Republican [i]Christianity Today[/i] ([i]CT[/i]) offered lessons about limits to power and skepticism about resorting to war without making a case for its necessity. Catholic bishops declared US policies unjust and priests like Daniel Berrigan engaged in radical protests. Although CALCAV lacked an authority comparable to bishops to speak for Protestants, it coordinated the efforts of key Protestant and Jewish leaders, as well as many Catholics, who felt that “allegiance to our nation’s policy” was trumped by allegiance to God. Martin Luther King, Jr. called for a “radical revolution of values” to “save the soul of America” from being “poisoned.”

[i]"And then 9/11 brought a complete lapse of memory.”[/i] For me,
these are the most interesting words in Toulouse’s essay. One might well argue that the Iraq War is a crime and debacle on a par with Vietnam and that the Bush administration has engaged in abuses more dangerous to democracy than Watergate—so that one might update King’s fears about democracy and ratchet them up a notch. Is it really true that people have forgotten this? I would substitute words like “silencing” and “marginalization” for “lapse of memory,” and would make fewer sweeping claims about “American values,” as opposed to stressing ongoing struggles for hegemony. I also would note that the silencing of dissent about Bush’s policies has become increasingly difficult, although it remains unclear how this will play out in the coming months.

One piece of this puzzle is how religious people approach US policy today, and in this connection it may be useful to complexify Toulouse’s approach to “values.” Recall the groups that we noted losing “trust in American institutions”: [i]CT[/i], various Catholics, CALCAV, and King. This is a motley crew, even before adding evangelical leftists and the student left. Toulouse links them through adapting Robert Wuthnow’s argument about values and behaviors in the culture war. Although I admire much about Wuthnow’s scholarship, I have long found this particular distinction imprecise and misleading.

Consider how Toulouse slips between the following terms: “values” (unqualified), conservatives teaching “individual values,” “values Americans held,” “expressed ideals,” and “military power placed at the service of national values.” Toulouse stresses a gap between “expressed American values” (are these also hegemonic ideologies? propaganda? illusions? idolatries?) on the one side, as contrasted with behaviors that he describes with words like “credibility gap,” “American leadership decisions,” and “lack of clear purpose,” along with examples of violence in war. He builds on one of Wuthnow’s more useful points by exploring these gaps. Still, note how many different “value vs. behavior” pairs we could create using the lists above. King’s language about a “revolution in values” offers a clue to the problem. “Values” are not a self-evident yardstick (especially not one defined largely by the right side of the culture war, as for Wuthnow.) Rather, there is an ongoing debate about what values/behaviors are appropriate, on both the left and right.

Narrowing down the range of this debate, Toulouse centers much of his argument on this quotation from the [i]Christian Century[/i]: “Americans have lacked a vision of their principles”—in a context which presupposes that religious and patriotic values should work together harmoniously to provide a yardstick for criticizing policy mistakes. Beginning from this point, one might move in two directions. One path leads toward harsher criticism of “American values” as deeply constituted by military expansion and colonialism. We might interpret King’s call for a “revolution of values” as a halfway house that moves in this direction while hoping against hope for redemption. Meanwhile, a second path assumes that “arrogant” and “unrealistic” behaviors are
deviations from an intact core of democratic principle. This allows an implicit claim of innocence in values to be maintained, not least through a vision of projecting power more realistically in the future, so as not to become "mired in fiascos."

This second path was the one that people like King and John Bennett were coming to see as unrealistic and unjust in the 1960s as they forged alliances with more radical critics. It was the loophole left open by ICT as it conceded limits to US power while still describing people who agreed with King as "termites." It was an argument used by emerging neoconservatives such as Paul Ramsey, who assumed that "realism" centered on fighting external enemies—Nazis, Communists, and later "Islamo-fascists"—as opposed to addressing economic injustice and neo-colonialism. During the 1960s such people often operationalized their values by promoting Cold War liberalism. Thereafter some continued in this same vein; others re-invented themselves as neoconservatives and worked to bury the New Deal.

Toulouse makes the case that all these people lost confidence in US Vietnam policy sooner or later. Still, their differences matter today. How severe is the post-9/11 "lapse of memory"? To what degree does believing US government propaganda remain "dissipated as an option for thoughtful Christians"? How many such Christians exist? How can they find a voice? Can they prevent neoconservatives from silencing and marginalizing them? I hope we can use forums like this to explore such matters.

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Mark Hulsether
University of Tennessee

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[b]Wild at Heart[/b]

When the infamous photos from Abu Ghraib began appearing in the spring of 2003, the patriotic bloviation was predictable albeit obnoxious. "This is not what America is about," one Senatorial blowhard declared, while President Bush denied that the photos displayed "the true nature and heart of America." The fact that Americans had posed the helpless prisoners, taken the pictures, and sent them giddily home didn’t provoke any metaphysical quandaries in these nestors of the republic. But the politicians were only voicing the fundamental beliefs of the citizens. Like ecclesiastical purists who insist that "the Church" is unsullied by the sins of its members, Americans like to think that "America" remains un tarnished and unidentified by the crimes of soldiers and statesmen.

I recall being struck by the lack of popular outrage and by the...
mean-spirited nonchalance that seemed to be the order of the day. That’s War, I often heard, or They Had It Coming. So I couldn’t help but agree with Susan Sontag when she wrote that, despite all the protestations of American innocence (what other virginity has been lost so often?), “the photographs [i]are[/i] us.” (1)

I wish Mark Toulouse had shown Sontag’s impatience in his informative but disappointing article. As he points out, most religious opposition to the Vietnam War had little or nothing to do with pacifism. The “Christian realist” position first sketched out by Reinhold Niebuhr, together with the “just war” tradition upheld by mainstream Catholic writers, were the wellsprings of dissent for the majority of clergy and religious activists who opposed the war. He also contends – rightly, I think – that these “realist” frameworks were congruent with a political culture in which more and more Americans saw a “disjuncture” between “the values Americans held and the behaviors they exhibited in Vietnam.”

Toulouse is at his best conveying the clarity with which the [i]Christian Century, Christianity and Crisis, Commonweal,[/i] and other dissenter saw the brutal irrationality of U.S. conduct in Vietnam. While, for reasons I’ll lay out in a moment, I object to Toulouse’s assertion that “it took longer for conservatives” to measure the chasm between American values and the prosecution of the war, he successfully demonstrates that religious liberals appealed to Americans’ professed ideals. These enlightened Americans, he concurs with one [i]Century[/i] editor, appreciated both the loftiness of their ideals and the “ambiguity” of political reality.

It’s here that Toulouse disappoints, for “ambiguity” is one of those words – add “maturity,” “responsibility,” etc., [i]ad boredom[/i] – that cover a multitude of sins in the rhetoric of [i]gravitas[/i]. The pivotal issue, in this framework, becomes the gap between “ideals” and their practical application,” a distinction that any good “atheist for Niebuhr” could respect. It’s worth recalling that secular liberals like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. opposed the Vietnam War because it was “unwise” or “unwinnable,” not because they considered it patently [i]immoral[/i] to lather napalm on defenseless civilians. By accepting this “realist” framework for understanding and evaluating U.S. conduct in Vietnam, Toulouse precludes discussion of more fundamental and disturbing questions. Were – are – American “values” so praiseworthy? Was – is – the relationship between these professed “values” and our unedifying “behavior” so self-evidently contradictory?

Do American [i]ideals[/i] lie at the root of our callous – and increasingly hated – behavior? The possibility that neither conservatives nor liberals can afford to consider is that American conceptions of “freedom” and “democracy” and “progress” are inexorably violent and imperialist. Like so many other scholars, Toulouse seems to think that a liberal commitment to “freedom” and “self-determination” ensures both the forsaking of violence and the renunciation of imperial desires. A long
line of Indians, Africans, Filipinos, Cubans, Nicaraguans, and others might have dissented, if they hadn’t been slaughtered or oppressed in the name of “Providence” or “Manifest Destiny” or whatever grandiloquent phrase was in fashion.

From slavery to genocide to the Cold War [i]realpolitik[/i] that culminated in Vietnam, all these atrocities were justified in the theodicy of Freedom and Progress and Liberation. That ruthless and clueless idealism is the Ariadne’s thread that links Vietnam and Iraq. President Bush was only rehearsing a venerable American conviction when he pronounced that “freedom” [i]must[/i] be on the march, and that God in His wisdom has anointed us as the vehicle of liberation. (2) So if whole ways of life – if whole communities of people – have to be destroyed in order to be saved, then any expression of outrage at the inevitable carnage and suffering is uncomprehending, or impertinent, or blasphemous.

American Christians have, on the whole, never experienced the slightest tremor of doubt about the essential goodness of American “ideals,” and I suspect that’s why, in a piece purporting to examine [i]Christian[/i] responses to the Vietnam War, Toulouse pays so little attention to the Catholic left. Tom Cornell and Gordon Zahn have cameo speaking roles, and the Berrigans receive some mention. But Dorothy Day gets consigned to the footnotes, while Thomas Merton goes completely unacknowledged. Why this omission?

Tom Cornell’s remarks on draft-card burning provide a clue. American nationalism, he observed, had “subsumed a good part of our traditional real religion.” Like most religions, Americanism has its sacred texts and objects, so burning a draft card was a sacrilege, because the card was “a sacrament. And there’s nothing worse that you can do in sacramental terms than defile a species of the sacrament. And this was a defilement, a real blasphemy against the state.”

Cornell’s insight into the nation-state’s parody of the Church – later formulated in more theoretical terms by William Cavanaugh – was an incisive act of prophecy. (3) While liberal Protestants, mainstream Catholics, and anti-war evangelicals were lamenting the alleged contrast between America’s “values” and its “behavior” – always an ironic pledge of allegiance to the country’s central conceit – the Catholic left not only rejected the realist assessment of U.S. policy, but it challenged the basis of American civil religion, its grandiloquent claim to exemplify the best and obvious hope of humanity.

If there’s such a thing as the moral calculus of atrocity, the mistreatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib doesn’t approach the My Lai massacre. But they both stem from the civil-religious enchantment that requires the parody of ecclesiology – “this isn’t what America is about” – and enables the blindness to empirical reality that sustains the delusion of innocence. 9/11 didn’t cause any “memory lapse,” as Toulouse asserts. To the contrary, that tragedy resurrected, in the
most self-pitying and bellicose forms, all of the nation’s most cherished and dangerous illusions about its providential blessings. As the Catholic left pointed out, identifying the gap between ideals and behavior isn’t enough – it’s not even the right approach. We need to ask, like Tom Cornell, if our violence isn’t finally traceable to the “true nature and heart of America.”

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Eugene McCarraher
Villanova University

Vandeve52
Posted: 22 Jun 2007 20:47

Post subject: Mark G. Toulouse’s response to Hulsether and McCarraher

I want to begin by thanking both Mark Hulsether and Eugene McCarraher for their careful and analytical reading of this essay and for providing such thoughtful comments in response. I would like to respond to each briefly in turn.

I should mention the fact that the words “And then 9/11 brought a complete lapse of memory” were not an original part of the essay, either in its larger form, or in this shortened version. I regret that they have played such a large role in the responses. I added the words for most of the reasons Hulsether notes. The Vietnam essay illustrates, in a number of ways, how the Iraq War is “a crime and debacle,” to use Hulsether’s words, “on a par with Vietnam”. These words were also added to indicate, at least by strong inference, that organized Christian dissent to the Iraq War has been slow in developing. I agree with Hulsether that “silencing” and “marginalization” are appropriate words, especially in light of legislation like the Patriot Act. But these
words describe governmental or official actions, perhaps, for example, taken by neoconservatives in possession of some form of power. My added words were meant more to infer something about Christian response to 9/11 and the resulting war on terrorism in general, and in Iraq in particular. To my knowledge, there has not been an active “silencing” of Christian dissent concerning the war, nor has there been any extraordinary government, or even public, “marginalization” of Christian groups who have expressed strong disagreement about the persecution of the war. There simply is little religious activity in response to American war in Iraq that even comes close to that of CALCAV, even though the origins of this war have been much more suspect from the beginning than was the case with the origins of American involvement in Vietnam. Why this lack of organized response, and what might prompt it (loss of memory concerning Christian lessons learned in Vietnam?)? These added words were meant to point in those directions.

Both Hulsether and McCarraher note the “values” and “behavior” gap. Their thoughtful responses indicate what is missing from my discussion in this particular essay, though I have addressed some of these issues more clearly in other portions of my work - in the yet unpublished and broader project with which this essay is associated, and both in my early published work dealing with John Foster Dulles, and, more recently, my book [i]God in Public [/i](Westminster John Knox, 2006). What is evident in much of independent Christian journalism, nearly across the board from the 1950s forward, is too much readiness to buy into the actual existence of a powerfully operating set of intact values associated with a liberal democracy. As McCarraher points out (and Hulsether’s “second path” also describes), Americans, generally, like to view America as transcending the individual sins of its leaders, military personnel, or citizens. As the Vietnam essay indicates, the editorial musings of these independent journalists often took this approach, using American claims about “liberty and justice for all” to call the sins of individual leaders or the military, or even the nation itself, to some kind of judgment, as if these “sins” were betraying something fundamentally American.

Realists like Reinhold Niebuhr have emphasized the “vice” contained in any professed “virtue.” Niebuhr, for example, also spoke clearly about the unadulterated evil that results from failing to recognize that vice is always, and [i]essentially[/i], present ([i]The Irony of American History[/i]). But it did not keep Niebuhr from using America’s professed values as a proof of judgment against the nation’s obviously evident vices. King did the same thing. Remember the “I Have a Dream” speech, early within which he claimed: “In a sense we have come to our nation’s capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” King possessed no
naive belief in the *essential* virtue of America. Yet, he used America’s professed ideals to judge contemporary behaviors because it suited his purposes. These independent journalists, both those few (like Niebuhr and John Bennett) who knew these professed ideals did not truly exist as *essential* virtues, and those more conservative journalists who tended to believe they did, eventually emphasized the credibility gap between them and the activities represented in the Vietnam war. But, personally, I agree with McCarraher’s use of Sontag’s quote in reference to Abu Ghraib, “the photographs *are* us.”

Naturally, therefore, I would also affirm McCarraher’s main point that American ideals themselves often do lie at the root of the nation’s violent and imperial behavior. As I noted in *God in Public*, George W. Bush stands in a long line of American presidential activity when, in response to 9/11, he said “America was targeted for attack because we’re the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world.” A year later, in an anniversary ceremony, he also stood in a long tradition of presidential rhetoric when he confiscated for government usage the words of John 1:5 word for word, without citation or use of quotes, and applied them to America: “This ideal of America is the hope of all mankind. That hope drew millions to this harbor. That hope still lights our way. And the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness will not overcome it. May God bless America.” Further, Bush’s clear and theological use of the word “evil” in this war, accompanied by theological descriptions of enemies as those “who have no soul, no conscience, people who hate freedom” show just how America’s professed ideals can and do lie behind violence and imperial behavior.

Finally, McCarraher notes that this essay contains little about the Catholic left. The longer version of the essay contains more of this discussion, but McCarraher is certainly right about this version - though, personally, I felt it was hard to improve much on Cornell’s words, which I understood to be rather self-evident in their meaning. I would only add that McCarraher’s assumption about why the omission exists is not an accurate one. In fact, as I believe most of my published work would make clear in ways this essay did not, I happen to share the Catholic left’s challenge of “the basis of American civil religion, its grandiloquent claim to exemplify the best and obvious hope of humanity.” But I also appreciate that McCarraher has provided a better and more concise statement than any of those made either by the independent Christian journalists, or by me anywhere in the narrative of this essay, that the Vietnam war “resurrected, in the most self-pitying and bellicose forms, all of the nations most cherished and dangerous illusions about its providential blessings.” I will likely quote him in any future version of the essay when I add some paragraphs to bring greater clarity to my discussion of the journals’ interests in the credibility gap between professed values and the nation’s behavior in Vietnam.