

'War' on Christians Is Alleged

Conference Depicts a Culture Hostile to Evangelical Beliefs

By Alan Cooperman Washington Post Staff Writer Wednesday, March 29, 2006; A12

The "War on Christmas" has morphed into a "War on Christians."

Last December, some evangelical Christian groups declared that the religious celebration of Christmas -- and even the phrase "Merry Christmas" -- was under attack by the forces of secularism.

This week, radio commentator Rick Scarborough convened a two-day conference in Washington on the "War on Christians and the Values Voters in 2006." The opening session was devoted to "reports from the frontlines" on "persecution" of Christians in the United States and Canada, including an artist whose paintings were barred from a municipal art show in Deltona, Fla., because they contained religious themes.

"It doesn't rise to the level of persecution that we would see in China or North Korea," said Tristan Emmanuel, a Canadian activist. "But let's not pretend that it's okay."

Among the conference's speakers were former House majority leader Tom DeLay (R-Tex.) and Sens. John Cornyn (R-Tex.) and Sam Brownback (R-Kan.) as well as conservative Christian leaders Phyllis Schlafly, Rod Parsley, Gary Bauer, Janet Parshall and Alan Keyes.

To many of the 400 evangelicals packed into a small ballroom at the Omni Shoreham Hotel, it was a hard but necessary look at moral relativism, hedonism and Christophobia, or fear of Christ, to pick just a few terms offered by various speakers referring to the enemy.

To some outsiders, it illuminated the paranoia of the Christian right.

"Certainly religious persecution existed in our history, but to claim that these examples amount to religious persecution disrespects the experiences of people who have been jailed and died because of their faith," said K. Hollyn Hollman, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty.

"This is a skirmish over religious pluralism, and the inclination to see it as a war against Christianity strikes me as a spoiled-brat response by Christians who have always enjoyed the privileges of a majority position," said the Rev. Robert M. Franklin, a minister in the Church of God in Christ and professor of social ethics at Emory University.

White evangelicals make up about one-quarter of the U.S. population, and 85 percent of Americans identify themselves as Christians. But three-quarters of evangelicals believe they are a minority under siege and nearly half believe they are looked down upon by most of their fellow citizens, according to a 2004 poll.

In a luncheon speech yesterday, DeLay took issue with the "chattering classes" who think there is no war on Christians.

"We are after all a society that abides abortion on demand, that has killed millions of innocent children, that degrades the institution of marriage and often treats Christianity like some second-rate superstition. Seen from this perspective, of course there is a war on Christianity," he said.

Much of the conference revolved around the difficulty of Christian parenting in a culture of sexual permissiveness. Don Feder, founder of a group called Jews Against Anti-Christian Defamation, urged the crowd not to blame "the liberal, self-hating Jews in Hollywood."

"Remember, the people in this audience are more Jewish than people like Barbra Streisand, because you embrace Jewish values, she doesn't," he said.

Another Jewish speaker, Michael Horowitz, told the conference that the "Christian decency of this country" saved him from becoming "a bar of soap" in Nazi Germany.

"You guys have become the Jews of the 21st century," said Horowitz, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute in Washington, just before a false alarm interrupted his speech. Several attendees called the fire alarm suspicious, though a hotel spokesman said it resulted from a mechanical problem in a distant location.

In the session on recent cases of persecution, Navy Lt. Gordon James Klingenschmitt brought the crowd to its feet by introducing himself as a military chaplain "who prays in the name of Jesus."

Klingenschmitt said he was punished by a commander for offering sectarian prayers at a memorial service for a fallen sailor, and he compared himself to Abdur Rahman, an Afghan man who until this week faced possible execution for converting from Islam to Christianity.

"What do these two Christians have in common?" Klingenschmitt asked, showing slides first of himself, then of Rahman. "Perhaps we are persecuted. Perhaps we are no different than most Christians throughout history."

Lloyd Marcus, a painter, said he entered three paintings in a Black History Month art show at the City Hall of Deltona last month. But because the canvases showed a man wearing an "I love Jesus" cap and a minister holding a Bible, city officials deemed them inappropriate until the Alliance Defense Fund, a Christian legal group, threatened a lawsuit, he said.

The Rev. Tom Crouse, pastor of a Congregational Church in Holland, Mass., said that after hearing about a gay beauty pageant in California, he decided to hold a "Mr. Heterosexual Contest" in Worcester, Mass., on Feb. 18.

"It was just an event to proclaim the truth that God created us all heterosexual," he said. But to his surprise, he said, he received anonymous death threats, local officials condemned the contest, and "even Bible-believing churches were not on board. They said it wasn't loving."

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