

# **Letter from the mainstream American Churches protesting the use of extremist language by Christian Fundamentalists**

## **An eloquent statement we received through email**

### **HATE LANGUAGE PUSHES POLITICAL CONFLICTS TOWARD RELIGIOUS CLASH**

ISSUE: There has recently been an escalation of religious hate speech that is likely to be reflected in political campaigns leading up to the November 5th elections. On Sunday, October 6, Rev. Jerry Falwell on "60 Minutes" defamed Islam and its Prophet as terrorist. The President has used the religiously-loaded word "evil" to characterize both individuals and nations - casting Iraq, Iran and North Korea as an axis of evil. In the Congressional debates on Iraq, some speakers went even further; Rep. Earl Pomeroy (D-ND) called Saddam Hussein, "uniquely evil." This tone of rhetoric, when coupled with widespread public fears following the 911 attacks and the patriotic justifications for war with Iraq, presents a situation that is ripe for demagoguery and, furthermore, can provoke retaliation by militants.

#### **ACTION:**

Urge politicians in their campaigning to refrain from language that promotes hatred, specifically the labeling of people or nations as "evil", and to oppose the ethnic and religious stereotyping of Arab and Muslim people and nations.

When you hear or see the language of hate in candidate forums or campaign literature/ ads, register a complaint by calling or writing or emailing to the campaign headquarters. The contact information is generally included in campaign materials.

Make the point that words with religious connotations, such as "evil", can be the building blocks of ethnic and religious stereotyping and the dehumanization that have in the past led to war crimes and ethnic cleansing. Ask that politicians speak in ways that encourage peace between nations and goodwill between peoples as well as a rational consideration of the issues.

#### **BACKGROUND:**

A year ago following the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, there was an outpouring of sympathy for the United States from many Arab and Muslim states and people. The President reached out to assure Muslim Americans and all Americans that the U.S. war on terrorism was not a war against Islam, which he called a "religion of peace."

But the war against terrorism seems to have become a boundless war of morality against the forces of darkness, of good versus evil, in which shades of grey are not possible. Rev. Franklin Graham, successor to his famous and tolerant father, has repeatedly called Islam an "evil" religion that preaches violence. Washington Post staff writer Steven Mufson posits that President Bush's worldview stresses the hatred and ambition of "evildoers," in stark contrast to former Presidents Bush and Clinton, both of whom stressed nations' self-interests as key to policy and strategies.

Reporting on Christian religious views on a U.S. war against Iraq, the subhead in the Washington Post of September 28 was, "Most Question U.S. Moves Toward War, but Evangelicals Embrace Bush Policy as Assault on Evil." Richard Cizik, a leader of the National Association of Evangelicals, said the President has articulated a faith much like his own - a faith that includes the existence of "evil" in the form of people like Saddam Hussein.

Your critique of hate language should be accompanied by promotion of the language and actions of peace, justice and reconciliation. Peace should be the highest policy objective of the United States in the Middle East with leadership directed toward a negotiated agreement that ends the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Israel's occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem.

Dr. Bernard Sabella, who works in Jerusalem for the Middle East Council of Churches, recently wrote about verbal violence. He, a Palestinian Christian, wrote to the Rev. Jerry Falwell that his remarks on "60 Minutes" were offensive to Christians as well as to Muslims. "A commitment to stop violence, all violence, should also include a commitment not to utter verbal violence. What our world needs now is more understanding, compassion and healing across continents and within societies. It is on persons like yourself that such a burden falls. Uttering statements that project hostility and enmity and in generalizing tones make you part of the problem confronting our world today and not part of the solution."

The significance of language and religious/ethnic stereotyping was also raised by the General Assembly Council of the Presbyterian Church (USA) on September 28th in a statement on Iraq: Calls upon our President, Vice-President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, National Security Advisor, Attorney General, and Congressional leaders to:

- speak in ways that encourage peace, rather than war, and refrain from language that seems to label certain individuals and nations as "evil" and others as "good;"

- oppose ethnic and religious stereotyping, affirming the value of all United States citizens and others around the world who embrace the visions of peace found in Islam and other faith traditions.

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Churches for Middle East Peace is a Washington based program of the American Friends Service Committee, Catholic Conference of Major Superiors of Men's Institutes, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Church of the Brethren, Church World Service, Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Friends Committee on National Legislation, Maryknoll Missioners, Mennonite Central Committee, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, Presbyterian Church (USA), Reformed Church in America, Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, United Church of Christ and the United Methodist Church.