

# Can irrationalism promote democracy?

by Nicholas Benton

George Shultz has the U.S. State Department “playing God” again, and the results promise to be as disastrous as the department’s legendary Khomeini fiasco.

“In the early years of the 20th century, fashionable opinion probably would have dismissed the idea that the latter decades of this century would be a time of religious revival. The conventional wisdom of the time was that this modern age of reason and science could hold little room for something as supposedly irrational as religious faith,” Shultz quipped in opening remarks to a controversial “Conference on Religious Liberty” officially co-sponsored by and held at the State Department on April 15 and 16. Over 200 religious leaders attended. Co-sponsors included the Institute on Religion and Democracy, the Foundation for Democratic Education, the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, the Jacques Maritain Center at Notre Dame, and the National Association of Evangelicals.

The conference was further proof that the rise of irrationalist ferment in fundamentalist religious garb is no accident of history. The State Department itself has been a major player, and the Khomeini fiasco in Iran has clearly taught them nothing. In that case, it was Ramsey Clark, as an official plenipotentiary of the Carter administration, who led the way in producing Muslim fundamentalism’s takeover. And now, despite a confession of failure in Shultz’s bitter opening-remarks denunciation of Khomeini (whom the Russians, after all, now control), the conference was a landmark in U.S. government involvement in the promotion of religious movements for political objectives.

“Religion remains a powerful force,” Shultz said. “We will have to leave to future historians the full explanation of this resurgence of faith in the modern age. Perhaps the social dislocations of an era of progress have strained people’s inner resources. . . . Whatever the cause, the new vitality of religion represents a clear rejection of the modern notion that reason and science hold all the solutions to the problems of earthly existence. . . . or that all the answers to these human problems and needs somehow lie with the state.”

But Shultz does not mean the Judeo-Christian tradition of St. Augustine and others, which shaped the development of Western civilization and laid the foundation for the modern form of sovereign, republican nation-state. Rather, Shultz

referred to forms of Gnostic heresy, anti-rational, mystical cult movements which, he expressed the hope, would trigger an “evangelical revival” against the Soviet state. Alarming, in his brief speech to the attendees, President Reagan echoed this deluded line that Russian Orthodox religious ferment is a force for freedom in Russia—a notion which plays directly into the hands of the “Third Rome” imperial objective of *current, close collaboration between Russian Orthodox and Politburo leaderships*.

The basic fallacy underlying the conference’s cynical outlook is the notion that the interests of democracy—against the Soviet state, for example—are advanced by the promotion of an *irrationalist* appeal to the spiritual needs of the individual.

Boston University’s Peter Berger articulated this view in his remarks on the opening panel, saying that “basic human rights” have to accompany economic progress to make anyone “happy”—something, he says, the strictly materialist, atheist Soviets don’t understand. “Two calculi have to be figured into everything someone does,” he said. “The first is to reduce pain and increase well-being. The second is meaning, which is associated with respect for religious values.” Berger argued that modernization “alienates” man through greater abstraction, anonymity, and remoteness, and that the effects of this are mitigated through “mediating structures” of which religion becomes the most important.

By setting man’s need for such a “mediating structure” against the source of his “alienation,” i.e. the Soviet state, the latter can be undermined.

*EIR* chose to throw a monkey-wrench into this reasoning: Why should one not assume that the Soviets themselves have figured this out, and are promulgating religious ferment themselves for their own ends—in Russia, and in the United States against the U.S. government (this is in fact going on)? Panelists chose to overlook the annoying question. However, spokesmen for various Soviet-watch organizations then began to point at the interface between the Soviet Politburo and the Russian Orthodox patriarchate.

The relationship between heteronomic irrationalism in individual identity and the promotion of tyranny has been known since Plato. In a negative form, it was the basis for Hobbes’ notion of the tyrannical implications of a society based on “each against all.” Or, as the *Federalist Papers* stress, democracy is based in the promulgation of reason as the instrument of justice and morality. Ignorance, irrationality, and superstition are the tools of tyranny. If such are promoted, not the sovereign democratic state, but tyranny triumphs.

Yet, that is what the State Department’s conference promoted. As Yale University’s Firuz Kasemazadeh quipped, “If you want to really know, on the world scale, Protestant fundamentalism and Islam are the real games in town for the rest of the century.” Yes, Mr. Kasemazadeh, but games no republican nation-state can win.