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## Tony Blair's Leap of Faith

By Michael Elliott/Bethlehem

In 1910, when Bethlehem was a town in a sleepy province of the Ottoman Empire, a local man built a magnificent house on the main road from Jerusalem to Hebron. Made from the region's limestone—whose shades, from pale honey to dazzling white, give the Holy Land its distinctive palette—the house was built around courtyards and fountains in the Ottoman style; frescoes and mosaics graced its walls and ceilings. In the 1930s, the man's family went bankrupt. The house was later used as a prison by the British, when they governed Palestine under a League of Nations mandate; it then did service as a police academy and a school. But in 2000 the old house was converted into a hotel. Closed during the second intifadeh, the Jacir Palace InterContinental reopened its doors in 2005.

On the evening of May 21, hundreds of business leaders from the region and beyond flowed through the halls of the hotel, past banks of honeysuckle and jasmine, into the garden, where cooks grilled chicken on giant charcoal burners and served baba ghanoush, tabbouleh and baklava. Participants at a conference on investment opportunities in Palestine, they talked up the prospects of the local information-technology industry (whose products, which can be whizzed to markets electronically, are not subject to the whims of Israeli border guards) and bragged about the performance of the Palestine stock exchange. At the center of the crowd—trim, smiling and looking a lot more relaxed than he did a year ago, when he resigned as Britain's Prime Minister after 10 years at the post—was Tony Blair, the special envoy to the Middle East of the U.S.-Russia-European Union-U.N. "Quartet" of powers.

On May 30 in New York, Blair, 55, formally unveils The Tony Blair Faith Foundation, which, among other things, is dedicated to proving that collaboration among those of different religious faiths can help address some of the world's most pressing social problems. A quick look around the crowd at the Jacir Palace, and you might think that Blair's work was already done—here were Jews, Christians and Muslims working together to make life better for ordinary Palestinians. A more measured assessment would lead to a different, more depressing conclusion. The Jacir Palace is a few minutes' walk from a checkpoint at the looming security wall that Israel built after the second intifadeh, to physically separate the Jewish state from the West Bank. In Bethlehem, a long-established Arab Christian community is shrinking in the face of growing Islamic militancy. Even the Church of the Nativity (carved up by the Orthodox, Catholic, Assyrian, Coptic and Armenian denominations, a symbol of the divisions within Christianity) has not been immune to the clash of faiths. In 2002 Palestinian militants took refuge there, and together with civilians inside the

church, were besieged by Israeli soldiers for 39 days. Blair understands very well that the Palestine-Israel conflict is about land, about culture, about competing narratives of history—but that it is also about faith. "Muslims often say of extremists," he says, "It's really got nothing to do with religion. And I say to them, These people say that they're doing it in the name of God, so we can't say that it doesn't matter. It does matter."

In two long conversations with Blair recently, I explored his conviction that religion matters—that it shapes what people believe and how they behave, that it is vital to understanding our world, that it can be used to improve the lot of humankind. But if not engaged seriously, Blair thinks, faith can be used to induce ignorance, fear and a withdrawal of communities into mutually antagonistic spheres at just the time that globalization is breaking down barriers between peoples and nations. "Faith is part of our future," Blair says, "and faith and the values it brings with it are an essential part of making globalization work." For Blair, the goal is to rescue faith from the twin challenges of irrelevance—the idea that religion is no more than an interesting aspect of history—and extremism. Blair and those working with him think religion is key to the global agenda. "You can't hope to understand what's happening in the world if you don't know that religion is a very important force in people's lives," says Ruth Turner, 37, formerly a top aide to Blair in 10 Downing Street, who will head the foundation. "You can't make the world work properly unless you understand that, while not everyone will believe in God or have a spiritual life, a lot of people will." Blair, she says, has been thinking about these issues "for decades and decades and decades." Over time, says Blair of the foundation's work, "this is how I want to spend the rest of my life."



## Doing God

In Blair's home country (which is also mine), that comment will be met with a snort of derision. Blair is deeply religious—the most openly devout political leader of Britain since William Ewart Gladstone more than 100 years ago. He handles questions about religion deftly. He doesn't back down. His longtime press secretary and consigliere, Alastair Campbell, remembers Blair in 1996 at a school in Scotland where a gunman had killed 16

children and a teacher. In a bloodstained classroom, Campbell asked Blair, "What does your God make of this?" Blair, says Campbell, stopped and replied, "Just because man is bad, it does not mean that God is not good." There was, says Campbell, a force, a sense of conviction in Blair.

All of which would be fine if Blair were, say, a U.S. politician—and so expected to profess his faith even if he didn't have much of one. But, at least in its public aspect, Britain is one of the most aggressively secular societies on the planet. Though Blair went to lengths not to make a big deal of his faith when in office ("We don't do God," Campbell once said, though he now insists he did so only to get rid of a journalist who had overrun his allotted time), that did not stop the British from making fun, or worse, of Blair for his religious beliefs.

For many Britons, the fact that Blair led them into a deeply unpopular war in Iraq is reason enough to question his sincerity. And the supposed "God is on our side" messianism of George W. Bush—Blair's geopolitical partner—is widely loathed in Britain. But long before Iraq or his association with Bush, Blair's faith was a source of something like contempt. For many in the British media, there is no fault worse than to be a sanctimonious "Creeping Jesus." During Blair's time in office, the satirical magazine *Private Eye* ran a regular (and very funny) column in the form of a parish newsletter, with Blair cast as the cloyingly earnest vicar of St. Albion church. Over the years, I have been struck by the vehement unwillingness of people in Britain to accept that Blair's faith is genuine or that it might provide genuine insights into our global condition. His religiosity was "incomprehensible," one well-known intellectual sniffed recently; I have heard Blair's recent conversion to Catholicism, a faith that has long had a following among posh Brits (think *Brideshead Revisited*), explained on the grounds of "snob appeal."

This is nonsense. Blair's parents were not churchgoers. But John Rentoul, Blair's first biographer, pointed out years ago that Blair's faith had been noted by those around him since he was a small child. Blair "rediscovered" his Christianity, he told me, while a student at Oxford in the 1970s. He was part of an informal late-night wine-and-cigarettes discussion group led by Peter Thompson, a charismatic Australian student and Anglican priest then in his 30s. (Thompson, who now lives in Melbourne, does not talk about his relationship with Blair.) I went up to Oxford just before Blair did; it was absorbed with sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, with a sprinkling of student politics on top, and to espouse religion of any sort was to mark yourself as something of a freak. (My own family was deeply religious, something I successfully hid from my Oxford friends for years.) Those in Oxford's "God squad," Blair remembers, were at "the cutting edge of weirdism." Thompson, by contrast, Blair told me, was "an amazing guy—the first person really to give me a sense that the faith I intuitively felt was something that could be reconciled with being a fun-loving, interesting, open person." In 1974 Blair was received into the Church of England at his college chapel.

Blair's faith took on an extra dimension when he met and married Cherie Booth—like him, a young lawyer—after graduating. Blair's wife is a devout Catholic; not a posh Catholic, but a Liverpool-Irish, working-class, convent-educated girl with cousins who became priests. In her recent memoir, Cherie makes plain the centrality of religion to their relationship. Of the young Blair, she says, "Religion was more important to him than anyone I had ever met outside the priesthood." She and Blair would spend hours "talking about God and what we were here for. I don't think it would be too strong to say it was this that brought us together."

Their four children have been brought up as Catholics, and Blair has worshiped at Catholic churches for more than 20 years. But Britain, for all its secularism, is still nominally a Protestant nation with an established

Protestant church; when Princess Anne's son Peter Phillips—11th in succession to the throne—married on May 17, his Canadian wife had to renounce her Catholicism. It was not until Blair left office that his long spiritual journey reached a destination that many had long anticipated, and he was received into the Catholic Church.

## What Came Before

Blair says he converted to catholicism to fully share his family's faith. But he plainly enjoys being part of a worldwide community with shared values, traditions and rituals. And why not? In a sense, the Catholic Church has long embodied the attributes of globalization that now engage Blair. Long before there were multinational companies, long before there were global NGOs like Médecins Sans Frontières, long before there were international organizations like the U.N., there were religions—communities of faith with a global reach, whose adherents tramped from one end of the earth to the other, saving souls. To be sure, in their zeal to convert, missionaries often mixed faith with cruelty, as Spain's blood-drenched conquest of Mexico in the name of God abundantly proved. But as Nayan Chanda of the Yale Center for the Study of Globalization argued in his recent book *Bound Together*, the great religions were also intimately associated with the growth of trade and human contact. "For all the horror it visited upon people," wrote Chanda, "missionary activity had the effect of shrinking the world. The spread of proselytizing faiths brought dispersed communities into contact." Coffee, for example, traveled with Islam (which forbade the consumption of wine), spreading from Yemen throughout the Arab world, then into Turkey and Europe. The constant back-and-forth of Buddhist scholars between India and China nourished the Silk Road as an avenue of commerce. Sometimes religious divines explicitly advanced the process of globalization long before anyone knew of the word. I collect maps of the provinces of China drawn by Martino Martini, a 17th century Italian Jesuit missionary whose exquisite cartography revealed China to the world—and, indeed, to the Chinese themselves.

In the past decade, however, this old connection between religion and globalization has been augmented in a surprising way. Faith-based groups and social activists, two communities that long treated each other with distrust, thinking themselves poles apart politically, have come together to tackle issues of global poverty and health. For once, you can date precisely when a movement took off: it was in June 1999 at the G-8 summit of industrial democracies, in Cologne, Germany. I vividly remember arriving in town, expecting debate to be dominated by a rehash of the Kosovo war, which had ended that week. But Cologne had been hijacked by tens of thousands of supporters of Jubilee 2000, a campaign to forgive debts owed by the world's poorest countries. With its roots in Europe's churches, Jubilee 2000 brought together, in a great ring around the city, hymn-singing, sandal-wearing nuns, teenage kids and veterans of progressive politics. As Bono of the rock band U2 puts it, the movement saw "activists, punk rockers and priests marching in step."

In Cologne, Bono and his fellow Irish rocker Bob Geldof had an audience with Blair. Bono says that Blair was "the first head of state with whom we didn't have to argue that debt cancellation was not about charity, but justice." (Campbell remembers the meeting a little differently. Blair, he writes in his diaries, said debt relief was like Mount Everest. Bono replied, "When you see Everest, Tony, you don't look at it, you f\_\_\_ing climb it.") I had breakfast with Blair in his hotel room the next morning, anxious to know how the talks on Kosovo had gone. In hindsight, I'd missed the key point of the weekend; in its Cologne communiqué, the G-8 countries committed themselves to debt relief, proof that a new and powerful alliance had been born.

Blair now wants to tap into the global links that have been built between development activists and people of

faith. "Faith," he says, "can be a civilizing force in globalization," which will doubtless be the theme of the course on the topic that he will be teaching at Yale this fall. His foundation will seek to partner with organizations to advance the U.N.'s eight Millennium Development Goals adopted in 2000. Blair's first target is malaria, which kills around 850,000 children each year; many of these deaths could be easily avoided by prophylactic bedding. "If you got churches and mosques and those of the Jewish faith working together to provide the bed nets that are necessary to eliminate malaria," says Blair, "what a fantastic thing that would be. That would show faith in action, it would show the importance of cooperation between faiths, and it would show what faith can do for progress."

In its work in support of the Millennium Development Goals, the foundation will use its funds—it aims to build up a war chest of several hundred million dollars—to work with others active in the developing world. Rick Warren's Saddleback Church, for example, uses church-based clinics to provide basic health care in Africa. (Warren will serve on the foundation's advisory board.) I spoke by phone recently to Ari Johnson, 25, a Harvard medical student now working in Mali, West Africa, with Project Muso Ladamunen, a small Washington-based organization, who made Blair's point for him. "We've seen how potent the involvement of communities of different faiths can be," Johnson says, describing an international fund-raising effort around the Jewish festival of Sukkot to raise bed nets for Mali.

But inspiring though such tales may be, Blair will not find his work easy. Religion is not an uncontroversial matter in the developing world—witness the Catholic Church's doctrine on abortion and contraception or the discrimination that women face in many Islamic societies. Moreover, in many nations, the legacy of the "war on terror" and the invasion of Iraq—both of which Blair is deeply associated with—have soured the environment for anything that looks even remotely like Western Christian proselytizing. That is why the foundation stresses that it hopes to work with groups from six faiths: the Abrahamic trinity of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, together with Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs. But Blair's history as a partner of Bush—and hence the skepticism with which his good faith is held—means he has high hurdles to leap if he is to turn his fine words into action.

### **Coming Together**

Blair says his foundation will try to ensure that faiths encounter one another "through action as much as dialogue." But the dialogue is important. In our conversations, Blair kept harking back to the idea that people of different faiths need to learn more about one another and understand where they can work in common. The alternative, he thinks, is that religious people will be tempted to define themselves in exclusion to others rather than in cooperation with them—with potentially disastrous results. Says Bono: "I think he wants to dedicate the rest of his life to decrying the concept of a clash of civilizations." Bono told me that Blair once gave him a copy of the Koran, at a time when Blair was reading a passage from the holy book every night to try to understand Islam better. Eboo Patel, a young Muslim from Chicago who is the founder and executive director of the Interfaith Youth Core, hopes Blair will bring a new dynamism to an interfaith movement that can sometimes seem to consist of the same people meeting endlessly to discuss the same issues.

One senses, however, that it is not just relations among faiths that Blair wants to influence. It is also the relationship between those who rejoice in their faith and those who think religion is something quaint, the stuff of history books. And here Blair's religious agenda intersects another of his concerns: the growing distance between U.S. and European attitudes toward the world.

Blair has enough old-fashioned British reserve to have his doubts about the way religion is used in the American public square. Whenever Blair was on a foreign trip, says a close aide, his staff had to find him a church in which to worship each Sunday—and then try to make sure that the press didn't learn of it. By contrast, says this aide, "Bush and Clinton are always photographed coming out of church holding a Bible." But at the same time, Blair insists that Europeans need to understand the importance faith has in American life—and recognize that in its all-pervasive secularism, it is Western Europe, not the U.S., that is out of step with much of the rest of the world. "Europe," says Blair, "is more exceptional than sometimes it likes to think of itself."

That is true. But it is also true that if Blair's foundation is to take off, it will need support from Europe—and especially from his home country—as much as from the U.S. That is by no means assured. By the time he left office, Blair was deeply unpopular in Britain, and not just because of Iraq; Britons were tired of what they saw as a government of constant spin, tinged, toward the end, with sleaze. Though Blair's successor, Gordon Brown, has seen his own popularity plummet, there is no sign yet that Blair's reputation in the U.K. has been rehabilitated.

Blair is always careful to downplay the role his faith played in complex matters of life and death, such as the invasion of Iraq. "You don't put a hotline up to God and get the answers," he says. At the same time, he plainly thinks his faith has helped him make tough decisions. "The worst thing in politics," he says, "is when you're so scared of losing support that you don't do what you think is the right thing. What faith can do is not tell you what is right but give you the strength to do it." But in a nation like Britain, where cynicism is a way of life, that distinction—between faith as a guide to action and faith as an aid to decision—is almost bound to be lost. Blair, the chattering classes of London will say, is the same smug, self-satisfied politician, immune to criticism, that he always was.

In nearly 25 years of watching Blair, I've never thought that was a fair judgment, and having spent time with him in the past few weeks, I'm more persuaded than ever that it's wrong. Blair is not without faults. In the Middle East, where he has so far achieved little concrete success as the Quartet's envoy, it is uncomfortably common to hear the claim that he spreads himself too thin. He can, no question, come across as a bit cocksure in the rightness of his judgments. But he swims in deep waters. He is convinced, he told me, that in the rich world, "without spiritual values, there is an emptiness that cannot be filled by material goods and wealth." He understands that faith is what gives meaning to the lives of billions, and he passionately believes that the world would be a better place if people of faith harnessed their talents together in aid of the common good.

Perhaps most important, his faith is not exclusive. Blair has a generosity of spirit that enables him to see that beliefs other than his can contribute to mutual goals. "I think he knows he has a steep incline ahead on a long journey," says Bono. "And I don't think it will be his considerable powers of persuasion or his winning smile that will have him seated at a table breaking bread, or taboos. It will be the true respect in which he holds the other pilgrims."

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