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With Bishops Like This, Who Needs Heretics?

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Retired Bishop Bennett J. Sims is the author of *Why Bush Must Go: A Bishop's Faith-Based Challenge*, published just in time for the 2004 presidential elections. The little book never lives up to its title, for Bishop Sims tells us far more about himself and his bizarre theological pilgrimage than about President George W. Bush. Nevertheless, for all the wrong reasons, this book offers genuine illumination concerning the peril of theological liberalism.

Bishop Sims served as bishop of Atlanta from 1972 to 1984, earning a reputation as a progressive within the Episcopal Church and experiencing no small amount of controversy within his own diocese. After his retirement, he served as founding president of the Institute for Servant Leadership at Emory University. A U.S. Navy officer during World War II, Bishop Sims is an energetic man of ideas. Sadly, this book shows that his ideas are both profoundly wrong and powerfully dangerous.

Bishop Sims begins his convoluted argument by citing his experience during World War II. At that time, the United States was engaged in a noble war under a noble president. Now, Bishop Sims laments that the United States has become an imperial power determined to despoil the world, exert its own power, and glorify its leadership. "By contrast with the years of my military service (1943-1946), my country now pursues policies that exacerbate the peril to God's world by an imperialist violence that the great religions have long repudiated," he asserts. If his fellow Americans do not accept his argument and change their ways, "the planet and all forms of its life face a darkening horizon."

From the very beginning, Bishop Sims frames his argument in the context of an eccentric view of human history. According to the Bishop, human consciousness has been evolving for the last 100,000 years, and has now reached "a massive point of turning." Even though President George W. Bush and the War on Terror are unfortunate developments, he is certain that history is moving towards an era of global negotiation and peace. "Following millennia of violence as the prime conflict resolution mechanism, human sensitivity is now moving toward a renewal of an even older recourse to nonviolence as the way to compose the inevitable clashes of personal and public wills," he insists.

According to the Bishop's historiography, archaeology and paleontology have traced "the emergence of advanced human consciousness" in a series of sequential patterns that have moved from a long period of prehistoric cooperation to the last six thousand years of competition and violence. Bishop Sims wants to call humanity to a new third age of collaboration and continued evolutionary consciousness. Standing in the way of this vision is President George W. Bush and his insistence on framing the War on Terror as a battle between good and evil. Nevertheless, Bishop Sims finds hope even in the present, seeing grounds for optimism "in the growing worldwide revulsion from superpower swagger and an aroused conviction that violence only compounds the very violence it seeks to subdue."

A good many Episcopalians might be shocked to know that the prime authorities Bishop Sims cites for his argument are individuals such as Carl Jung and the Dalai Lama and a series of New Age theorists.

Before turning to Bishop Sims' favorite authorities, perhaps we should ask an obvious question: What about the Bible? Clearly, Bishop Sims simply places the Bible within the process of human consciousness in evolutionary development. Far from believing in the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture, Bishop Sims holds to a basically naturalistic worldview. He raises the miracle accounts in the Gospels, for example, only to dismiss them as "editorial additions by the writers in the early believing community." The Gospel writers offered the miracle accounts as "exaggerations characteristic of literature that seeks to commend and exalt history's high heroes." Jesus would not have wanted such aggrandizement, Bishop Sims insists, for instead of exercising power over creation, Jesus represented the power of collaborative peacemaking and nonviolence.

All this ties back to Bishop Sims' understanding of two different approaches to power. As he explains, "There are two antithetical power motifs in the religions of the world: the conventional dominator drive and the visionary collaborative ideal." Unsurprisingly, Bishop Sims identifies the first motif with fundamentalism. "It is locked into an old and ebbing form of human consciousness," the Bishop urges, but its continuing power is demonstrated in the current "fundamentalist" regime of President George W. Bush.

Where does the Bishop get his understanding and worldview? His main authority appears to be New Age writer Riane Eisler, author of *The Chalice and the Blade*. Eisler, along with Harvard anthropologist William Ury and the late Jesuit mystic Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, provide the Bishop with the ideological framework for his thesis and worldview. Sadly, the Bishop seems to have no understanding of the fact that Riane Eisler is a New Age writer whose work is not taken seriously in the academic world and whose theories on everything from history to feminism to sex have more in common with Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* than with serious scholarship. Not slowed down in the least, Bishop Sims charges on to use his central insight of an evolving consciousness to suggest that humanity must overcome its fundamentalist preoccupation with truth and power and move on to the collaborative future of servant leadership, world peace, endless negotiation, and a utopia of full sexual inclusion.

The gaping holes in the Bishop's thought will be obvious to anyone who picks up this short treatise. Amazingly, he picks and chooses among anthropological theories to suggest that human beings lived peaceably with one another for "93 percent of our 100,000 years as sapiential humans." Ignoring for the moment his naive acceptance of evolutionary theory, one can only wonder how Bishop Sims would explain the fact that so many of the skulls analyzed by paleontologists bear the marks of axe blades and spears.

In another section, the Bishop cites anthropologist Richard Leakey as suggesting that it was the cultivation of land that led to war, human struggle, and endless conflict. Accepting Bishop Sims' argument at face value, it would seem that we should go back to a prehistoric era, cease cultivating the land, and starve to death, rather than to face the threat of competition.

But that would be to dismiss Bishop Sims' analysis without a closer look. For the Bishop goes on to explain that human kind is moving through three different developmental phases. The first and longest of these phases was the childhood of humanity, a period that lasted, he argues, until the modern age. Modernity represents the adolescence of humanity, an awkward period of war, competition, and conflict that is marked by the rise of a male-dominated worldview and a suppression of minorities, especially women and homosexuals. President George W. Bush, who is actually cited very rarely in the book, is criticized as a representative of humanity's adolescence, leading a naive crusade and seeking to build his own evil empire. Bishop Sims points toward a third and more promising age, the adulthood of humanity, a period that began with the end of World War II, he argues. Of course this means that President George W. Bush and his fellow "fundamentalists" represent the forces of evil that are standing in the way of humanity's evolving consciousness.

"Fundamentalist religion is cast in the ancient male-dominant tradition and is preoccupied with an imminent and violent end to the world," the Bishop argues. Fundamentalists believe, for example, in human depravity and in the exclusivity of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Bishop Sims wants nothing to do with the idea that faith in Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation. This belief, he argues, "represents the sharp exclusivist character of fundamentalist preaching and teaching—some of it impatient for an immediate world's end, some of it grimly patient for a victorious evangelism that will eventuate in a world-embracing Christian church."

The “faith alternative” Bishop Sims proposes “is an evolutionist understanding of God’s will and action in the world.” Bishop Sims cites the new physics as proposed, for example, by Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn, focused upon “interbeing.”

Looking to the promise of the future, the Bishop points with pride to his own garage, in which sits a “Prius,” a small hybrid-fueled automobile from Japan. “There is something pleasingly ‘spiritual’ about that car,” the Bishop reflects. “It stands as an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace—an irreversible shift in the soul of contemporary humanity.” His Prius, he excitedly remarks, “is only the first mass-produced ‘hybrid’ vehicle to honor the cries of the earth.” Just imagine that as an advertising slogan!

While Bishop Sims sings the praises of his Prius and calls upon Americans to remove President George W. Bush from office, he also points to a new age of sexual liberation. In a bizarre twist, Bishop Sims was the author of the 1977 prohibition on the ordination of homosexuals adopted by the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, USA. The Bishop now says that he has repented of his former argument, and has now come “to a firm conclusion almost the reverse of my earlier view.” Bishop Sims now believes that homosexuality is “an ontological characteristic, as birth bestowed as skin color and gender identity in the overwhelming majority of gay men and women.” Thus, Bishop Sims now insists that homosexuality is “natural” for homosexuals, “as natural as my maleness and creeping baldness.”

Now Bishop Sims opposes the very policy he helped to formulate, and he is making up for lost time by serving as a speaker, writer, and activist on behalf of the homosexual movement. He was one of the bishops present to celebrate the consecration of Gene Robinson as the Episcopal Church’s first openly gay bishop.

While faithful conservatives within the Episcopal Church pray for reformation and recovery, Bishop Sims points to an irresistible future of what he styles inclusivity and liberation. “We have responded in nonviolence to the just demands of black sisters and brothers, women in Holy Orders, liturgical reform, and same-sex oriented men and women as disciples and leaders among us. Our next step into the moral courage of the first three centuries of the Christian odyssey will be our nascent readiness to repudiate war.”

Just when you think the book cannot possibly be worse than it appears, Bishop Sims actually turns Christian orthodoxy on its head, championing the cause of Pelagius and accusing Augustine of Hippo of heresy. Pelagius, a fifth-century heretic, taught that human beings were born in innocence. He was opposed by Augustine, the greatest theologian of the early church, and Pelagius’ heresies were condemned as antithetical to the Gospel. Now, many centuries later, Bishop Sims finds Pelagius’ views of human goodness far more attractive than Augustine’s biblical view of human sinfulness.

This absurd theological retrogression allows Bishop Sims to completely redefine the Gospel, reformulate the church’s understanding of Jesus Christ, and substitute New Age psychology for New Testament theology.

With this little book, Bishop Bennett J. Sims has given us a portrait of theological confusion, the wreckage of doctrinal liberalism, and the nonsense of New Age fantasies masquerading as serious thought. This goes a long way towards explaining how the Episcopal Church found its way into its current crisis. With bishops like this, who needs heretics?

