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VERMONT POSTCARD

THE LIGHT OF SUNDAY

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The Reverend William Sloane Coffin, now seventy-nine and suffering from terminal heart disease, no longer preaches on Sundays, but he can't stifle the urge to prepare new material for what might as well be called impromptu sermons—at banquets and award ceremonies (increasing numbers of which are held in his honor these days), or whenever someone happens to drop by and express an interest. (“I’d like to think I could view all people as potential converts,” he has said.) He keeps a stack of spiral-bound notebooks handy for jotting down interesting quotes and facts that he comes across while reading, for eventual incorporation into what he calls his ministry of “eclectic scholarship.” Recent entries include the phrase “trickle-down nuclearism,” from Robert Jay Lifton’s new book, “Superpower Syndrome”; a description of President Bush as being “too intellectually insecure . . . so he retreats into the cocoon of the like-minded,” from a *Times* column by David Brooks; and James Carroll’s characterization of Jerusalem as the epicenter of “God-sponsored violence.”

Politics and religion have never been far apart in the preachings and doings of Bill Coffin. As the chaplain at Yale, in the sixties, he was jailed for his activities as a Freedom Rider in Montgomery, and then tried, as a member of the Boston Five, for conspiracy to resist the Vietnam draft. Later, as the head of Manhattan’s Riverside Church, he ministered to the American hostages in Iran, and advocated aids awareness in the epidemic’s early years. According to Coffin, the faith’s two Biblical mandates are not preserving the sanctity of life and stamping out sin, as Jerry Falwell might have it, but, rather, the pursuit of justice and the search for peace. His new book, “Credo,” which is made up of excerpts culled from a lifetime of sermons and speeches, amounts to a spiritual denunciation of modern American government. So it was not surprising, the other day, to hear Coffin sounding off on Iraq.

“Anybody sitting in distant Vermont knew perfectly

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this week's talk

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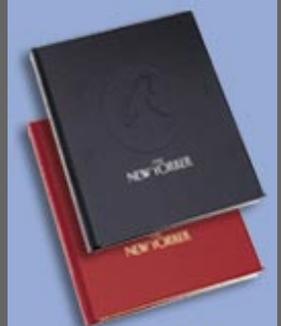


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well that, just as Yugoslavia was threatened with chaos after Tito, in Iraq after Saddam Hussein you'd have Kurds in the north, Shiites in the south, and the Sunnis in the middle," he said. "And now we're going to form a democratic government?" Coffin was sitting at his kitchen table, with flies buzzing around him, in distant Vermont—Strafford, a village of about a thousand. There was snow in the yard. "It's Sunday—I guess I'm getting worked up," he said. "These guys, don't they know anything about history? Poor old Woodrow Wilson said, 'We're ending World War I—we're going to make the world safe for democracy.' As a result, we opened all kinds of doors to every kind of dictator, from Atatürk all the way to Salazar, and in between Franco, Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin." Coffin's wife, Randy, stoked the fire in the living room. Their Dalmatian sat quietly nearby, seeming almost to listen. "If you know your New Testament, you know it was the Devil who tempted Jesus with unparalleled power and wealth," he continued. "Well, that's something to think about for a superpower."

Norman Mailer once described Coffin's voice as equal parts union organizer and Ivy League crew coach. He speaks more deliberately now, struggling to pronounce certain words—the result of a stroke suffered in 1999. Once an aspiring concert pianist, he has enormous hands, which he uses to punctuate his speech and, occasionally, to cover his face, as though particularly struck by the words he is about to utter. He is not, as is often assumed, a pacifist. He supported the initial strikes on Afghanistan, albeit with trepidation. But he admires the sense in which, as he put it, "an honorable pacifism recognizes that the mystery of evil is beyond its solution.

"Nothing is more dangerous than misunderstanding evil," Coffin continued. "Evil has an irremediable stubbornness about it. And it must be recognized, it has to be constrained, but it can never be resolved." His right hand briefly obscured his face, and then he resumed. "St. Augustine said, 'Yea, my pride-swollen face has closed up my eyes.' He also said, 'Never fight evil as if it were something that arose totally outside of yourself.' And that's what's so pernicious, so dangerous about Bush—that he just doesn't understand the stubbornness of evil, and he just doesn't understand American complicity." (Coffin's own "axis of evil" consists of "environmental degradation, pandemic poverty, and a world awash with weapons.")

Coffin can no longer leave home—a modest white house facing the town green—without a wheelchair, so he tends not to stray far. As summer turns to fall, he watches wild turkeys roam his back yard, and the

colors change in such a way that “Moses wouldn’t know which bush to turn aside,” he said. “Nature gets more interesting as you get nearer to joining it.” When winter closes in, he watches football.

As a self-described “yellow-dog Democrat,” Coffin offered his opinions on the Presidential campaign. Wesley Clark, he said, “might be a highly intelligent General Haig, or he might be a good leader of the party. I don’t know.” John Kerry, meanwhile, “has a face that looks as though it could be moved right up on Mt. Rushmore without going through the White House.” He smiled mischievously. “Joe Lieberman heard that I’m not supposed to last very long, so he called me. In his pious tone, Joe started to say how much I had meant to him. I cut him off. ‘Joe, I would give my right arm to have the influence on you now that I had then. You’re an orthodox Jew and a conservative Democrat. It’d be better if you were the other way around—a conservative Jew and an orthodox Democrat!’” Coffin is a Howard Dean man.

His primary aim in publishing “Credo,” he said, was to teach believers how to be proper patriots. “As Americans, we should love America, but pledge allegiance to the earth, to the flora and fauna and human rights,” he said.

“The book gives me a sense of completion,” he went on, his eyes following the dog around the room. “As old Hamlet said, ‘the readiness is all.’ I think I’m pretty ready.” He laughed. “I feel strongly that Oliver Wendell Holmes was right. Not to share in the activity and passion of your time is to count as not having lived. I don’t claim virtue. I claim a low level of boredom.”

It was almost time to retire to his bedroom to watch some more football. That night, the New England Patriots were playing the Dallas Cowboys. “Parcells is an absolutely extraordinary coach,” he said, “but we shall see. I’m for the Patriots.”

— *Ben McGrath*

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