

Politics or Religion? Christian Manifesto's Primary Target is President Barack Obama

'Christian' Manifesto Gathers Signatures

By [Peter Montgomery](#)

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Right-wing Christian leaders are making a concerted push to gain thousands of new signatures for their hate-filled Manhattan Declaration.

Religious right leaders are making a concerted push to gain thousands of new signatures for their “Manhattan Declaration,” a manifesto released late last year by about 150 conservative Christian leaders. The document, signed by such religious-right heavy-hitters as Focus on the Family eminence James Dobson and Prison Fellowship Ministries leader Chuck Colson, compares pro-choice advocates to eugenicists (and implicitly to Nazis) and equates same-sex marriage with polygamy and a gateway to legalized incest. Its authors promise to defy any law that does not comport with their religious beliefs. Joining the religious right’s Protestant leaders as signatories to the declaration are four Roman Catholic bishops, including those presiding over the powerful archdioceses of New York and Washington, DC.

[Described](#) by New York Times religion reporter Laurie Goodstein as “an effort to rejuvenate the political alliance of conservative Catholics and evangelicals that dominated the religious debate during the administration of President George W. Bush,” declaration authors initially set a target for a million signatures by December 1. Although they fell well short of that goal, they claimed at press time to have gathered more than 419,000 signatures and have redoubled their efforts to add more names.

The American Family Association made the Manhattan Declaration the centerpiece of a January fundraising letter, urging members to sign the document, warning of the grave threat from “the anti-family/anti-religious radicals who control the White House and Congress.” Focus on the Family posted a note on its “Action Center” on January 14. And several U.S. Catholic bishops — Cardinal Justin Rigali of Philadelphia, Archbishop Donald Wuerl of Washington, D.C., Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York, and Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz of Louisville — are [urging](#) their fellow bishops to preach about the declaration, get signatures from the faithful and use the document as an organizing vehicle.

If You’re Not With Us, You’re a Lot Like a Nazi

Supporters of legal access to abortion and supporters of physician-assisted suicide are described in the 4,700-word manifesto as “those who today assert a right to kill the unborn, aged and disabled.” The declaration goes on to link reproductive rights and death-with-dignity advocates with the early-20th-century eugenicists whose notions fueled the murderous Nazi ideology of genetic purity. From the declaration:

Eugenic notions such as the doctrine of lebensunwertes Leben (“life unworthy of life”) were first advanced in the 1920s by intellectuals in the elite salons of America and Europe. Long buried in ignominy after the horrors of the mid-20th century, they have returned from the grave. The only difference is that now the doctrines of the eugenicists are dressed up in the language of “liberty,” “autonomy,” and “choice.”

In other words, the declaration suggests the only difference between Nazi master-race theorists and today’s pro-choice and death-with-dignity advocates is rhetorical.

Similar respect is accorded to same-sex couples and those who support them. The declaration never mentions same-sex relationships without pairing them with polyamorous relationships or incest, a fact reflected in the headline of an Associated Press [story](#) (as it appears on Edge, an LGBT Web site) about the declaration: “Evangelicals, Catholics: Gay Marriage Paves the Way to Incest.” That, along with the well-documented anti-gay histories of many signers, makes it hard to take seriously the document’s assertion that it is “love (not ‘animus’) and prudent concern for the common good (not ‘prejudice’)” that is motivating the signers’ pledge to resist and defy laws that recognize civil marriage equality.

For the declaration’s authors, the concept of civil union seems worthy of contempt. “No one has a civil right to have a non-marital relationship treated as a marriage,” they write — echoing sentiments found on the [site](#) of the Conference of Catholic Bishops explaining the church’s opposition to any legal recognition of same-sex relationships: “We strongly oppose any legislative and judicial attempts, both at state and federal levels, to grant same-sex unions the equivalent status and rights of marriage — by naming them marriage, civil unions, or by other means.”

According to the declaration, marriage is, in the final analysis, about creating a “reproductive unit.” Yes, marriage may be about an emotional and spiritual commitment, but only one that is “completed and actualized” by sexual intercourse that fulfills “the behavioral conditions of procreation.”

America on the Brink of Anti-Christian Tyranny and Totalitarianism

The Manhattan Declaration, while presented as a religious tract, is more a political offensive, and its primary target appears to be President Barack Obama. Princeton University law professor Robert George, who co-authored the document with Chuck Colson, explained on Dobson’s radio show that one impetus for the declaration was the election of Barack Obama and Democratic majorities in Congress, who, he claims, are out to destroy traditional marriage and basic Christian values. The manifesto warns that restrictions on the right of religious institutions to discriminate in hiring threatens to undermine civil society and lead to “soft despotism.”

Although the document’s rhetoric sounds some old and familiar right-wing themes, it’s dressed up for the Obama era to include the now-standard right-wing warnings that the administration and its congressional allies are leading the United States into an era of Nazi-like tyranny. The document’s authors and signers preen as willing martyrs for the cause of religious liberty, highlighting dramatic, fictional claims of anti-Christian persecution run amok in America. “We pledge to each other, and to our fellow believers,” the authors write, “that no power on earth, be it cultural or political, will intimidate us into silence or acquiescence.”

David Dockery, president of the Southern Baptist-affiliated Union University, [compared](#) the Manhattan Declaration to the 1934 Barmen Declaration of the confessing churches in Nazi Germany resisting the Nazi-sympathizing state church. In a [Web video](#) promoting the document, Colson urged viewers to read Hanna Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, saying, "It is a very chilling book. It is prophetic, however, in its application to today."

In discussing the declaration with George and Colson on his radio show, James Dobson [stated](#) that with the passage of hate crimes legislation, "it could get very costly to follow this Christ," meaning that pastors and Christians are about to come under direct attack from the government, to which Robert George responded that Christian "martyrs have [always] been called on to pay the ultimate price rather than to deny the Lord or to do what is evil in his sight."

The document repeats bogus claims about the new federal hate crimes law, neglecting to note the law's explicit affirmation of First Amendment protections for free speech and religious liberty:

In Canada and some European nations, Christian clergy have been prosecuted for preaching Biblical norms against the practice of homosexuality. New hate-crime laws in America raise the specter of the same practice here.

The Hype

Despite the hyperventilated claims by the declaration's authors to be staking out new historical ground, the message essentially rehashes the anti-gay and anti-abortion messages religious right leaders have been spouting for decades.

This basic message, while gussied up in pages of prose from George and Colson, echoes speeches we've heard again and again by James Dobson, Tony Perkins, and many of the other familiar religious right leaders who are among the original signers.

Grandiose claims have been made about the Declaration's importance, based on the fact that it includes Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox leaders, and trumpeting its threats of widespread civil disobedience in response to civil marriage equality, legal abortion and end-of-life issues:

Because we honor justice and the common good, we will not comply with any edict that purports to compel our institutions to participate in abortions, embryo-destructive research, assisted suicide and euthanasia, or any other anti-life act; nor will we bend to any rule purporting to force us to bless immoral sexual partnerships, treat them as marriages or the equivalent, or refrain from proclaiming the truth, as we know it, about morality and immorality and marriage and the family. We will fully and ungrudgingly render to Caesar what is Caesar's. But under no circumstances will we render to Caesar what is God's.

Promoters of the Manhattan Declaration have made a big deal out of the supposedly historical significance of getting Roman Catholics, evangelicals and Orthodox Christians together on the same document and the same press conference podium. But this isn't 1950, and it's not really all that amazing for conservative Christians to join forces across

denominational lines in a political battle.

Anti-choice Catholics and evangelicals have long worked side by side in opposition to legal abortion, as they are currently doing to try to use health-care reform efforts to further restrict women's access to reproductive health services. In recent months, Catholic bishops have devoted massive financial resources and political muscle to resisting domestic partnerships and marriage equality, and shown themselves ever more willing to stand with extreme anti-gay voices of the evangelical right. In December, Catholic leaders shocked even many Washington-area Catholics by threatening to abandon Catholic Charities' extensive social service partnerships with the DC government if the marriage equality bill moving forward in the DC Council becomes law.

Nevertheless, the document's promoters insist it is history in the making. Manhattan Declaration co-author Chuck Colson said it was the most important document he has ever signed. Former presidential candidate Mike Huckabee said nothing of this significance has happened in his lifetime, and gushed on his [television show](#) that Colson, one of the authors of the declaration, would be "one of the great influences on history."

Document signers have been compared with, and compared themselves with, every Christian hero from the early martyrs to Martin Luther King. Huckabee suggested the document's historical importance equaled that of Martin Luther sparking the Protestant Reformation by nailing his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. James Dobson called it "a defining moment in America for the Christian church." (Of course, Dobson sees every election cycle as a defining moment.)

Appearing on Fox Newschannel's "The O'Reilly Factor," Ann Coulter [told](#) Bill O'Reilly it is a "fantastic statement" that might "wake up" the church.

Anti-abortion activist and WorldNetDaily columnist Jill Stanek [wrote](#), "In my mind, signing the Manhattan Declaration is the closest I'll come to understanding the thoughts and feelings of those signing the Declaration of Independence. Those men were willing to pay the ultimate price to stand against tyranny."

Given that in many parts of the world, Christians and people of other faiths are actively persecuted and killed for their religious beliefs, it's nothing short of shameful that these privileged and powerful public figures are pretending they run the same risk for their anti-gay and anti-abortion advocacy in America. After all, it isn't anti-choice activists in America who have been paying the "ultimate price," but doctors and other workers at clinics providing women in America with medical care who have been killed by advocates for "life."

The [first 168 signers](#) included an array of figures from the religious right legal and political movement, including James Dobson, Tony Perkins, Gary Bauer, William Donohue, Jim Daly, Jonathan Falwell, Richard Land, Mark Tooley and Alan Sears; Maggie Gallagher and Brian Brown from the National Organization for Marriage; anti-gay clergy like Rev. Ken Hutcherson, Rev. Jim Garlow and Bishop Harry Jackson; and Frank Schubert, the campaign strategist who devised the fearmongering anti-marriage campaigns in California and Maine. Also included were a number Roman Catholic Bishops, including Archbishop Donald Wuerl of Washington, some elders of Orthodox churches, and Peter Akinola, primate of the Anglican Church of Nigeria and a leading anti-gay voice in the Anglican church. Filling out the initial list are conservative professors, theologians and editors and publishers of conservative Christian publications.

[Asking](#) rhetorically if the attention-seeking Declaration was a sign of desperation or a show of power by the religious right, journalist and author Sarah Posner calls it “proof that the culture wars are not only not over; there hasn’t even been a truce.”

Politics or Religion?

Chuck Colson, one of the document’s authors, [rejected](#) the notion that the declaration is a political manifesto of the religious right, saying “nothing could be further from the truth.”

“This document is a clarion call to reach out to the poor and suffering,” he said. Maybe he’s referring to an earlier draft. In fact, the Manhattan Declaration is so far from the “clarion call” Colson describes that Jonathan Merritt, a younger evangelical, [wrote](#) in the Newsweek/Washington Post “On Faith” blog that “this declaration has relegated” other issues of moral concern — such as poverty and degradation of the environment — “to little more than a footnote.”

Progressives expressed their own concern. “This declaration simply perpetuates the fallacy that equality and religious liberty are incompatible and every step toward fairness for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community is another burden on religious people,” [writes](#) Harry Knox, director of the Human Rights Campaign’s Religion & Faith Program. “In reality, non-discrimination laws are working all over this country, where religious freedom is existing side-by-side with equal opportunity.”

The Religious Institution for Sexual Morality and Healing issued a [statement](#) describing the declaration as “a political call against women’s moral agency and the rights of lesbian and gay persons dressed up in religious language.”

The declaration “profoundly misrepresents the moral questions Christians encounter in America today,” [said](#) Reverend Timothy McDonald, founder of the African American Ministers Leadership Council and a board member of People For the American Way Foundation. “Perhaps even more importantly, I am deeply disappointed that the signers of this document would use scare tactics and mistruths to generate a wholly synthetic threat to religious liberty.”

A Los Angeles Times editorial [called](#) the declaration’s invocation of King’s Letter from a Birmingham Jail “specious,” saying the signers, “even as they insist on their right to shape the nation’s laws, are reserving the right to violate them in situations far removed from King’s witness.” The editorial also states:

Strong words, but also irresponsible and dangerous ones. The strange land described in this statement is one in which a sinister secularist government is determined to force Christians to betray their principles about abortion or the belief that “holy matrimony” is “an institution ordained by God.” The idea that same-sex civil marriage will undermine religious marriage is a canard Californians will remember from the campaign for [Proposition 8](#), as is the declaration’s complaint that Christian leaders are being prevented from expressing their “religious and moral commitments to the sanctity of life and to the dignity of marriage as the conjugal union of husband and wife.”

In the end, the Manhattan Declaration reflects rather than revolutionizes the trend toward a weakening of denominational lines and a strengthening of theological and ideological ties across denominational lines. In many ways, right-wing evangelicals and Catholics have

increasingly had more in common with each other, particularly regarding public policy and religion in politics, than liberal and conservatives within any particular denomination.

But it also reflects a potentially more troubling hardening of right-wing resistance to legal abortion and to cultural shifts that signal a nation increasingly supportive of equality for LGBT people. In a diverse and increasingly pluralistic nation, these conservative Christian leaders are inflaming false fears of religious persecution in order to justify their own intransigence and unwillingness to abide by legal, political and cultural changes they don't like.

If, as these and other conservative Christians have declared, their positions on abortion and end-of-life issues and marriage are "inviolable and non-negotiable," where does that lead? Clearly, it may lead to the Archdiocese of Washington decreeing that its supposed need not to provide health care benefits to the partner of a gay employee is more important than its multi-million-dollar partnerships with the District of Columbia government to provide services to the homeless and hungry.

And it could lead to worse. The editors of the Los Angeles Times called the Manhattan Declaration's "apocalyptic argument for lawbreaking" both disingenuous and dangerous, and asked, "Did the Roman Catholic bishops who signed the manifesto consider how their endorsement of lawbreaking in a higher cause might embolden the antiabortion terrorists they claim to condemn?"

The signers, concludes the editorial, "need to be reminded that this is a nation of laws, not of men — even holy men."

Amen.

Peter Montgomery is a senior fellow at People For the American Way Foundation. T

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