

THE Pardon... Religious Leaders Differ

By Religious News Service

President Ford's historic appearance before a House Judiciary subcommittee failed in the minds of many to dispel the mist of doubts and suspicions raised by his "full, free and absolute pardon" of former President Nixon.

Persistent among the lingering questions are the validity of Mr. Ford's "theology" of forgiveness and the consequences of such theology.

In announcing the pardon of his predecessor, Mr. Ford chose a Sunday morning hour to appear on television shortly after he had returned to the White House from partaking of the cup of Holy Communion at St. John's Episcopal Church.

Speaking with evident earnestness and sincerity, Mr. Ford made six references to God, six references to his conscience, and interlaced the announcement of pardon with references to angels, prayer, divine law, divine help, and the Spirit.

He said he wanted "to do right as God gives me to see the right to uphold our laws with the help of God." He had searched his conscience, he said, and "my conscience tells me clearly and certainly that I cannot prolong bad dreams." Contemplating his own appearance before the bar of divine justice, he declared: "I will receive justice without mercy if I fail to show mercy."

A French Jesuit theologian has suggested that by setting the pardon in a religious context, Mr. Ford may have hoped to disarm potential critics. "If Ford draws the cloak of New Testament moral theology around his pardon," said Father Michel de Certeau, "it makes it infinitely harder to argue with it. It puts opponents in the position of not having a Christian conscience."

A number of religious leaders applauded the Sabbath pardon. Evangelist Billy Graham said that Mr. Ford had acted with "decisiveness, courage, and compassion" in saving Mr. Nixon from prosecution, and had "saved the country from the emotional division and agony that would have further weakened America at home and abroad."



President Ford and Nixon

Roman Catholic Bishop James A. Hickey of Cleveland also supported President Ford's action, but asked that "the spirit of compassion" invoked in the Nixon pardon be extended to the "little people" involved in the Watergate affair and to persons accused of violating the law by resisting the Vietnam war.

The Rev. Andrew Young, a black United Church of Christ pastor, who is a Democratic congressman from Georgia, said the Nixon pardon amounted to a "certain mercy" to the country, because it allowed Mr. Nixon to retire from public life "without being martyred."

The Rev. William G. Hatch, chaplain of the House of Representatives, a United Methodist, characterized the pardon as "a good and wise thing to do."

Other religious figures, however, deplored Mr. Ford's action on grounds of theology as well as simple justice.

These critics pointed out that even within Mr. Ford's Bible-oriented, evangelical Christian framework, his pardon of Mr.

Nixon does not meet traditional conditions for an act of judicial mercy.

The Old Testament book of Hosea (14:3) explicitly mentions three conditions for divine forgiveness: confession of sin, conversion from sin, prayer for forgiveness.

In New Testament writings (Acts 19:18; James 5:16; 1 John 1:19) confession of sins and repentance are set forth as steps required for forgiveness.

Mr. Nixon, the record shows, has not admitted any real "guilt" in the Watergate affair and related matters. He has referred only to deep "regret and pain" over his "mistakes" and "misjudgments."

Mr. Ford told the House Judiciary subcommittee that his people had not demanded "a confession" from Mr. Nixon in exchange for the pardon, and none has come from the former President. But Mr. Ford said he felt that Mr. Nixon's acceptance of pardon was tantamount to an admission of guilt.

Divine forgiveness is the model

for human pardon, observes church historian Martin Marty, associate editor of the Christian Century, and involves "an annihilation of what the sinner was. God completely wipes the slate clean. But that only happens if there is repentance, an about-face, a 180-degree turn. There is no evidence that the former President is doing anything of the kind."

Dr. Earnest A. Smith, director of the human relations section of the United Methodist Board of Church and Society, asks: "How can a person be pardoned if he had not admitted criminal guilt or if such guilt has not been established in the courts?"

Presbyterian Robert McAfee Brown, professor of religion at Stanford University, faults Mr. Ford's effort to relate justice and mercy.

In an article in Christianity and Crisis, Dr. Brown refers to Mr. Ford's pardon statement that "as a humble servant of God (I) will receive justice without mercy if I fail to show mercy."

"This was Mr. Ford's first theological error," Dr. Brown

writes. "For justice and mercy cannot be so neatly disengaged from one another. A justice not tempered by mercy is harsh and loveless (and that is not Jahweh's brand), whereas a mercy that takes no account of justice is immediately sentimental and ultimately destructive (and that, sad to say is Gerald Ford's brand).

Dr. Brown alleges that "in trying to show mercy to Richard Nixon, the President acted with cruel injustice to John Dean, H. R. Haldeman, John Mitchell and over 30 other close associates of Mr. Nixon who will probably go to prison for crimes with which their boss cannot — due to Mr. Ford's action — be charged."

According to Commonweal, the independent, lay-edited Roman Catholic journal of opinion, Mr. Ford's pardon action "represents bad theology and even worse politics."

"To talk of mercy," said a Commonweal editorial, "while ignoring justice, is to make a mockery of morality, and this is what Mr. Ford had done. The President's desire to heal national wounds and show compassion is commendable; his fatal mistake, however, was his abysmal failure to appreciate that the American people also deserve compassion. The people are entitled, as a basic right, to know the full story of Watergate and of what went on in the White House."

Dr. W. Sterling Cary, president of the National Council of Churches, has also commended Mr. Ford for his desire to heal national wounds in the wake of Watergate. But, he emphasized, "this must be balanced by insisting on accountability for one's acts, not only for Mr. Nixon's team, but for Mr. Nixon himself."

"The pardon" of Mr. Nixon, said Rabbi Alexander Schindler, President of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, "violates our sensibilities and is an affront to our sense of justice." It will lead to further cynicism among Americans, he said, and bolster their "conviction that there are indeed two laws in the land: one for the lowly, and one for those who rule on high."

Scott Move Against Ratings Brings Warning of Anarchy

Chicago [RNS] — The current Christian Century warns that the freedom of the motion picture screen would be lost if local censorship should take the place of the current movie rating system. The possibility of such a change is raised in a discussion of George C. Scott's marketing of a film he directed and produced.

Citing the current distribution of Mr. Scott's "A Savage is Loose," which was given an R (restricted) rating over the objections of the actor, the editorial said Mr. Scott is "making a frontal attack on the entire (ratings) system by asking theaters to ignore the R rating and play his film without any rating at all."

The editorial, written by James M. Wall, editor of the ecumenical fortnightly published here, noted that the Scott film deals with the possibility of incest.

In addition to the financial

aspect of ruling out the distribution middleman, Scott's action is causing distress among theater owners who feel that if the ratings are ignored in his case the credibility of the system — "C-PC-R-X" — "will have suffered a serious blow," said Wall.

Wall observed that both the National Council of Churches Broadcasting and Film Commission and the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures withdrew their backing of the ratings two years ago. But he said a recent NCC study is under way and Protestants are promising a "re-endorsement" if several weaknesses can be corrected.

But, Wall said, the study "comes at a time when the system is also facing a severe challenge from within the motion picture industry" as a result of Scott's action.

He said "more than industry profits are involved in the continuation of this voluntary self-regulation at the box office. What is at stake is the freedom of the motion picture screen, a freedom that is constantly threatened by industry greed on the one hand and local censors on the other."

"And this is why religious support has always been ambiguous," he added, with church

film experts being "torn between fear of playing lackey to a commercial and exploitive business and fear of local, state or federal censorship, which the ratings are designed to supplant."

Speculating that Scott's film will not be given the "PG" rating he seeks, Wall said "exhibitors have come to appreciate the luxury of having their product labeled with words of caution to parents." He also expressed belief that most theaters owners who choose to display Scott's picture would do so under an R rating.

Conceding that Scott may be right in demanding a PG rating, Wall said "rules that are broken finally weaken the over-all structure. Anarchy can tear down a system faster than a voluntary democracy can build it." He added:

"The motion picture is an art form — admittedly commercial — and it cannot be regulated by government as a product. It can survive and grow only in an atmosphere of freedom."

Wall also admitted that the system is perhaps a "bit provincial," but it is certainly to be preferred to the sheriffs and small-town politicians who might otherwise determine the suitability of movies for the rest of us.



Photo By Bruce Genut

All Saints Day

The students of the St. Thomas More School studied their favorite saint and dressed in the costume of that saint for All Saint's Day. Richard Calabrese, John Blackman, and Chris Calabrese are dressed in the garb of the saint for whom they are named.



Madwoman of Chaillot

Bill Coughlin, the Sewerman, and Andrea Fiandach, Countess Aurelia, rehearse for the Nazareth-St. John Fisher Drama Club production of the Jean Giraudoux comedy, "The Madwoman of Chaillot," to be staged in the Nazareth Arts Center Auditorium Nov. 1-3. Performances are scheduled 8 p.m. Friday; 1 and 8 p.m. Saturday; and 2 p.m. Sunday.

PHOTO EXHIBIT

Photographs by David Witbeck, former Courier-Journal photographer, are now on exhibit at the Rochester Center for Alfred University, on the mezzanine level of Midtown Plaza. The show will run through Nov. 15. The hours are 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. weekdays.