

WHY THE

CHRISTIAN RIGHT WRONG



A Minister's Manifesto for
Taking Back Your Faith,
Your Flag, Your Future

Robin Meyers

*"This is not a book for narrow sectarian minds;
read it, and you will want to change the world."*

—Bill Moyers

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*To my three children,
Blue, Chelsea, and Cass,
and the next generation,
from whom we have borrowed the future*

Introduction

The 9/11 Effect

When the twin towers came crashing down on that bright, terrible September morning, most Americans were horrified at first, and then we were angry. It was immediately called “an act of war,” even though the old definition hardly applies. At first, we groped in the darkness of trauma for a reason why. The most important question was also the most difficult to ask: *Why do they hate us so much?*

A few brave souls dared to ask it, even fewer brave preachers, because most Americans were in no mood to sound self-incriminating. Introspection, after all, is no match for the purple monster of rage. To ask why is to admit the possibility of cause, and cause suggests complicity. If we are the innocent victim of vast, impersonal forces, then we can assuage our guilt with the illusion that evil can arise in a vacuum and that hatred can spring forth as a fully formed adult without the abuses of childhood.

Hatred, however, is not natural, nor is evil an inherited condition—despite centuries of Christian preaching to the contrary. Hatred is born of parents with names like Envy and Self-Pity. It is hatched in the sibling rivalries of Isaac and Ishmael. It is nurtured by the most powerful force ever to face down love and win: *fear*.

Even so, the first thing that Americans felt after 9/11 wasn't fear or hatred so much as an overwhelming sense that life is utterly unpredictable and that tomorrow is promised to no one. For a few days, with all the planes grounded, the sky itself fell silent. Life was suspended for a moment in the parenthesis of tragedy. Suddenly, the most important thing of all was to be with family and loved ones and

to know that they were safe. Emily Dickinson had it right, as usual: “After great pain a formal feeling comes.”

There was another feeling, however, that was much more difficult to talk about. As the rhetoric of vengeance grew louder, and a blinding patriotism swept the nation, some of us felt a different emotion, and it was unmistakable. The feeling was *dread*. Almost before the dust had settled, I knew that we were being put to the test. It was a test that required greatness in a president and the capacity for real sacrifice from the rest of us. Therefore, it was a test we were doomed to fail. What’s more, at just the moment when we needed the virtues of true faith, we were in grave danger of getting religion at its worst.

This moment of suspended animation was like a crack in time, when all the idols of American life seemed to evaporate and existence itself seemed briefly, poignantly precious. But it did not last long. We quickly resumed the crude pastime of buying and selling one another. The violent movies that we had stopped making for a few months came back, and once again we cheered mindless death and destruction.

What’s more, the enormous sympathy of the rest of the world, which held us in prayer through candlelight vigils and soulful solidarity, got left at the altar of history like a jilted bride. For a brief moment, we had experienced a global solidarity as the good will that is born of shared grief made ready partners out of the citizens of the world. The international community stood ready to join us in the greatest man-hunt in history. Justice demanded that the perpetrators of this horrific crime be caught and prosecuted because, in an hour so dark, people all over the world said they felt like Americans. They lit their candles and marched. They prayed. They offered their resources in the battle against terrorism. But in the end, we left them standing there—their candles burned out—with no way to help, save the sacrifice of their troops in what would become a disastrous war.

In Washington, a secretive and arrogant administration had closed its doors and started resurrecting a long dormant plan for the preemptive use of military force. A Washington-based think tank called the Project for the New American Century, created in 1997,

had already laid the groundwork for a new global American empire. Considered too radical at first for its advocacy of unilateral military force, the neoconservatives who dreamed up this new vision of *Pax Americana* had long waited for what they called “some catastrophic and catalyzing event—like a new Pearl Harbor.”¹

Only thirteen days after 9/11, the USA PATRIOT Act was formally submitted to Congress and passed on October 26 while both Congress and the American people were still in shock, and then we were called upon to circle the wagons, get back to shopping, and prepare to let the world know that nobody, but nobody “messes with the USA and gets away with it!”

At no time are human beings more malleable than when they are afraid. The test of a great leader is to *discourage* appeals to fear and to exhort the nation to hope, to courage, and to the rejection of vengeance. When FDR said, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” he could just as well have been inscribing the epitaph on a postmodern American tombstone. Now, it seems, *the only thing we have to fear more than terrorism is fear of terrorism itself*.

When I rose to preach in my own pulpit on the Sunday after 9/11, it felt sadly reminiscent of a day not long before when a clean-cut young Marine named Timothy McVeigh used a homemade truck bomb to bring down the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, killing 168 of my friends and neighbors. In Oklahoma City, we know something about the fruits of hatred.

Unfortunately, we also share a distinctly American disease, and it can be fatal. We confuse justice and vengeance. A civilized response to tragedy, after all, should be recognizably different, especially for those who claim to know that “those who live by the sword shall die by the sword.” What I prayed for that first Sunday after 9/11 was “an unearthly patience” and the wisdom of God, not the wisdom of Machiavelli—“lest countless more innocent people die.”

Looking back on it, the dread I felt that morning was sadly prophetic. Countless more innocents have now been killed than died on 9/11. The nation I love has rolled back civil liberties, divided the world up into good guys and “evildoers,” and squandered

the goodwill of our allies. The president's response to the legitimate hesitation of the United Nations was to say, in effect, either you're with us or you're "irrelevant."²

More frightening still, the dread I felt was not confined to politics. It was a dread about the future of religion in America as well. The twin forces of hatred and fear have now stoked the bonfires of religious bigotry and given Christian fundamentalists what they most desire: a common enemy and the newest face of evil. In the world according to such Christian Right luminaries as James Dobson, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson, the "enemy" is all nonbelievers, and the devil is that amoral monster called "secular humanism."

It lurks just outside the door of America's mythical little house on the prairie. Inside are the chosen; outside are feminist barbarians, abortionists, gays, gun control advocates, environmentalists, agnostics, college professors, tattooed free thinkers, sexual hedonists, UN sympathizers, and, of course, Democrats—the party that dances with the devil because it still cares about poor people.

Once that door is broken down, we are told, the unarmed innocents inside will be destroyed. The women will be raped, their Bibles will be burned, and the children will be turned into homosexuals. Because secular humanists do not have "moral clarity," we are now on a slippery slope that ends in moral chaos. Legions of Bible-quoting fundamentalists must lead the charge in what they believe to be a cosmic battle for the future of Western civilization. There will be no treaties. No compromise. It's winner take all.

What the rational world must now understand is that the forces against which we struggle are not rational. In fact, they view logic itself as seductive and dangerous. Fundamentalists, by definition, are not content to "live and let live." *Everyone must be converted.* If "nonbelievers" fail to see the light, they will spend eternity regretting it. Therefore, the lives of the nonconverted are clearly expendable.

September 11, 2001, gave Christian fundamentalists (who would prefer that we not use that word anymore) the perfect vision of a dark and chaotic future. They could claim that the sky was literally falling and that God really does punish evildoers. What's more, politi-

cians and their corporate owners could co-opt this fear, join forces with Christian conservatives, and form what is commonly called the Christian Right—a potent new voting bloc for the Republican party.

Throughout this book, I will be using the term *Christian Right* to define a powerful but complicated political movement in America. Although the term is often used to describe all conservative Christians and their political leanings, there are many evangelical Christians who do not share the agenda of the Christian Right, and some nonevangelicals who do. The Christian Right has been dominated by Protestants but also includes conservative Catholics, Jews, Mormons, and occasionally secularists.

Many evangelicals and fundamentalists decided in the 1980s and '90s to abandon their long-standing tendency to shun “faith-based” political action. Urged on by a new generation of TV preachers who declared that all things liberal were now all things evil, the faithful got up out of their pews and voted en masse for what they believed were “God’s candidates.” Estimates of the number of such voters who can be galvanized by specific issues like abortion and gun control ranges from 35 to 60 million.

Although they are far from identical in background or doctrine, they share a remarkably similar view that the Bible constitutes the immutable moral foundation of Western society and consider traditional Christian beliefs to be under siege from a host of “enemies.” Higher criticism in seminaries constitutes a threat to biblical inerrancy, as does the teaching of evolution in schools.

But the seeds of the Christian Right were actually sown in the tumultuous decade of the 1960s, when civil rights, women’s liberation, the sexual revolution, and the reemergence of Eastern religious ideas seemed to shift the moral universe on its axis. Supreme Court decisions banning compulsory prayer in schools, legalizing abortion, and protecting the wall between church and state stirred a deep resentment in many conservative Christians and their non-Christian sympathizers.

When charismatic figures like Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Phyllis Schlafly began organizing a mass media defense of what they

considered “traditional Christian values,” the Christian Right soon became a potent political machine. There is a broad consensus that the Christian Right was the deciding factor in the election and re-election of George W. Bush. After all, leaders of the Christian Right told their legions that it was a holy mandate: “I believe it is the responsibility of every political conservative,” said Jerry Falwell, “every evangelical Christian, every pro-life Catholic, every traditional Jew, every Reagan Democrat, and everyone in between to get serious about re-electing President Bush.”³

Even so, it must be clearly understood that there is both a Christian Right and a political Right, and the two are not identical. When I refer to the Christian Right, I will be referring to this broad, energized, theocratic voting bloc that has taken the media and much of the American public by surprise. Having provided a crucial “base” for the political Right, the two have now formed an uneasy and unholy alliance. Not all Republicans are fundamentalists, but virtually all fundamentalists are Republicans. As Bill Moyers astutely noted, the GOP is now, for all practical purposes, a theocracy—“God’s Own Party,” as the faithful put it.⁴

The worldview of the Christian Right is based on moral absolutes (spelled out primarily in what is believed to be an infallible Bible) regarding the fixity of sexual identity, the moral superiority of capitalism, and the sanctity of unborn life. Adherents believe that the government should cultivate virtue but not interfere in the marketplace or the workplace. What’s more, the lazy and the lawless should never be compensated by the proceeds or sympathies of the hard-working or the law-abiding.

The Christian Right has identified what it believes to be the greatest threat to morality: the illusion that ethical issues can be *contextual* and evolving. It has organized itself to do fervent battle against all moral “relativists” and does so by quoting selected Scripture removed from its historical context. A common characteristic of the Religious Right is the fear that any hole in the moral dyke will ultimately lead to the collapse of the entire moral structure and thus Western civilization itself. It is therefore safer to embrace an

unambiguous “moral clarity” than to think too much, ask too many questions, or employ the tenets of cogent reasoning.

Now that the Republican Party and the Christian Right have become one seamless political machine, they are taking no prisoners. With a Bible in one hand and a voter guide in the other, the political Right is firmly in control of two branches of government and has its sights set on the third, the judiciary, the last bastion of reason and respect for the separation of church and state. Even though the life appointment process was intended to make the courts the most apolitical entity left in the Republic, judges often make rulings that frustrate the Christian Right because they are not based on “biblical law.” For this reason, judges are considered the “new enemy.”⁵ They are all that stand in the way of an American theocracy.

Two years ago, in newspaper columns, on the radio, and from the pulpit, I began applying the term *Christian fascism* to the direction in which America is headed. Some of my friends and colleagues found the terminology too strong. Others called it “deeply offensive.” But when Oklahoma Senator Tom Cole’s chief of staff recently said that we should not just impeach judges who make the wrong decisions, but “impale them,”⁶ more people have started using the *f*-word without apology.

Fascism, after all, comes in many guises. It was once brown shirts, banned books, and the Holocaust. But it can take many forms, so long as vested interests control the government. All that is required is a nation full of uninformed people whose religion makes them more fearful than enlightened. Fascism thrives on a worldview that is black and white and co-opts the name of a partisan God to fight crusades that pretend to be about moral values but are in fact about preserving and protecting wealth and power.

Christian fascism corrupts both politics and religion by stifling political dissent and debate and by regarding kindness and compassion, the heart of religious faith, as naive. It dresses up as the savior of Western civilization, asking the rest of us to place our trust in the ability of the Appointed Ones to defend us while actually turning back the clock of human progress.

What's more, the heart and soul of Christianity itself gets hijacked in the process. Choosing to wage war instead of avoiding it if at all possible is *unthinkable* for a follower of the Prince of Peace. Demonizing the "other" in order to enrich oneself and protect a patronage system with revolving doors and no-bid contracts is exactly the kind of pious hypocrisy that the Rabbi from Nazareth railed against. Now has the peculiar and radical claim of the Gospel that "God is made perfect in weakness" become unrecognizable in an age of Warrior Jesus and Locker Room Christianity.

So let there be no mistake. This is the world to which my children, and the next generation, has now awakened. It's a world in which nothing is what it seems to be and reality itself is choreographed by corporate media with their eye on the bottom line. It's a world in which the soldiers we idolize slaughter a faceless brown enemy in the ancient cradle of civilization, and the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers now carry floating corpses past piles of rubble.

Meanwhile, back home, you wouldn't know there was a war going on. We are too busy discussing celebrity trials and antiaging creams. Should Jesus of Nazareth return and make a triumphal entry into Washington, D.C., he would surely weep again, saying, "You [still] do not know the things which make for peace."

The dreaded military-industrial complex that the departing President Eisenhower warned us about has now lost the hyphen and become one word. We cut taxes on the rich and pass the cost of a misbegotten war on to our children. We fiddle with fashion, trumpet gossip, and hawk get-rich-quick schemes while our own empire, our *Pax Americana*, burns. We are sleepwalking through a desert of lost conscience.

All of this can be chalked up to the ranting of a liberal minister, of course. When in doubt, just claim that your opponent is part of the enemy camp. But this all goes much deeper than partisan politics. In the church where this reputedly "Christian" nation still worships, we claim to be the disciples of a man who got so angry once that he overturned the furniture in the Temple and drove the moneychangers out with a whip. So much for Sweet Jesus, "meek and mild . . . gentle as a little child."

Besides, I have spent my whole life trying to persuade people that *liberal* is not a dirty word and that Christianity is a way of life, not a set of creeds and doctrines demanding total agreement. I've also pointed out that our electoral process is broken and corrupt and our politicians have become part televangelist, part lobbyist, and part independent contractor. What I did not know until recently, however, was that so many other Americans feel *exactly the same way*. They just needed someone to put their frustration into words.

That opportunity finally came my way, disguised as an “ordinary” event—a brief speech that I was invited to deliver at a peace rally on the campus of the University of Oklahoma. It was, in fact, the beginning of a life-changing event, and this book is the continuation of that speech. It is an elaboration of the grievances that struck such a deep chord in the hearts and minds of so many Americans. It is the fulfillment of my promise to rally like-minded citizens to take action to save the church that so many of us love but feel deserted by and the country we all call home but hardly recognize anymore.

It's the story of the power of the Internet and the resilient goodwill of countless forgotten Americans who are saddened by the arrogance and violence of our time. My intent is to fan the flames of a fire that is already burning and to remind those who would lead us that “we the people” still hold the power, and the consent of the governed will no longer be taken for granted when the government itself is corrupt.

Simply put, my speech was only the beginning of something much, much bigger than one man's opinion or one minister's attempt to speak truth to power. It is the beginning of what must become a proactive, systematic, courageous movement in America—a call to nonviolent resistance, to cultural noncompliance, and to social transformation.

For three simple reasons, the revolution starts here. The emperor is naked. The flag is flying upside down. And Jesus has been silenced by his own church.

Why the Christian Right Is Wrong

Part One

The Speech Heard Round the World

The invitation came after the November 2004 election, when half the country felt clinically depressed about the reelection of George W. Bush. People in the blue states were feeling blue, but “folks” in the red states, like my native Oklahoma, were thumping their suspenders. A giant billboard on the expressway in my hometown of Oklahoma City said it best: W: STILL THE PRESIDENT! OUR PRAYERS ARE WITH YOU!

Meanwhile, a group of students at the University of Oklahoma were planning a peace rally and candlelight vigil to protest the war in Iraq. They were looking for a speaker who could express the growing frustration they felt, and a rising tide of Americans now feel, about the lies that led us into this misbegotten war—and the tide of human blood it has unleashed.

What was different about this rally, however, was the sponsor. United Campus Ministry, an ecumenical religious organization that promotes interfaith understanding and protects second opinions in the Bible Belt, organized the event. This is no easy task in Oklahoma,