

VERDICT

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Savage Christians

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Roger Williams was a celebrated champion of religious freedom in America. But in pressing his cause, he met with bitter opposition from other Protestant Christians of his day. On one occasion he had to flee for his life from Massachusetts. He found asylum with an Indian tribe who not only accepted him but also his faith. Some time later the Christians of Massachusetts offered an amnesty to the banished heretic. He was free to return and to live with the Christians again. Williams however, replied, "I would rather live with Christian savages than with savage Christians."

History has amply demonstrated that Christians can be a savage group of people. Often, the more seriously they take their faith, the more ruthlessly they suppress their real or imagined opponents. (We say "imagined" because time has often clearly shown that "opponents" of the faith have become some of its best allies— e.g., scientific knowledge, secularism, separation of religion from the state, humanism and biblical criticism.) In an essay on tolerance Martin Marty quipped, "The problem is that the civil people are not committed and the committed people aren't civil" 1

Hans Kung, who has himself experienced hostility from his Roman Catholic brethren, made the sobering observation that the church "has killed a good many more martyrs than it produced from its own ranks." 2 When we compare the world's great religions, it appears that the Christian religion has generally been the most ruthlessly intolerant. It has been responsible for killing more people throughout history than has any other religion.

As Walbert Buhlmann says:

Our survey of this history of unsalvation has been in broad strokes, like the view from an overpassing satellite. Were we to resurrect the details from the archives, the reader would shudder, scarcely able to believe the facts of history. Thus any discomfort our pages may have occasioned here and there in their presentation of these facts is only the faintest echo of the furious indignation of those whom the church has persecuted and humiliated. 3

Then Buhlmann cites F. Heer, who says:

There is no world religion, and no human society, that has again and again amassed in its bosom the quantity of dynamite that “Christian society” has. ...Again and again it has manufactured its “deadly enemies” and its scapegoats. The church constituted itself the permanent pyre for the burning of “heretics” of right and left. 4

Although society today condemns and bans the punishment of religious dissenters, the same flame which wills to dominate or exterminate burns fiercely in Christian sects and is fed with the fuel of evangelical zeal. Multitudes of Christians are still imprisoned in religious ghettos, where they are forced to conform by a religious reign of terror in which freedom exists in name only.

It would be bad enough if these undesirable elements of evangelical zeal were suffered only by the inmates of such religious prisons. But often this fierce face of the Christian religion, like an aroused beast, threatens not only the liberty but the very existence of those who live well beyond the walls of the Christian ghetto. As an example of this, we refer to the updated edition of the book *Holy Terror*. 5

In a recent essay, James Barr expressed the view that the issue of religious fundamentalism is not just an irritating nuisance. It is such a threat to world peace that it may well determine whether or not the human race will survive into the twenty-first century. 6

The same apprehension is raised by the professional journalist Grace Halsell in her recent book, *Prophecy and Politics*. 7 Herself a Christian, Halsell marshals the startling evidence that millions of evangelical Christians, led by powerful religious personalities, are pushing the politics of the nation toward more and more nuclear armaments. The Christian right appear to be the most vocal “hawks” in the country. But worse than that Halsell presents the chilling evidence that in their evangelical fervor they are actually pushing, even lusting for a nuclear confrontation which they confidently believe will eradicate the ungodly Russians and all other enemies of the Christian faith. They believe this conflict will even destroy so many Jews that the remnant will confess that Jesus is the Messiah. Halsell testifies that when some of these popular evangelists preach on the coming nuclear holocaust their faces “turn radiant at the thought” 8

They have a battle site in Israel and a line of reasoning for a nuclear war— God wills it. And they preach, promote and actually sell Americans on the idea of building more bombs and then using them. 9

Yet these same evangelists insist on the necessity of being born again and filled with the Spirit of Jesus. Well may we pray, “Lord, spare us from too many born-again Christians in the world. Please overrule events so that many missionaries are sent home. Disregard our former petitions about converting the Hindus. At least they don’t believe in killing anything, least of all beautiful people.”

The particularism of the Christian religion has too easily dismissed non-Christians as bound for perdition. Of course, loving efforts are made to convert non-Christians to Christianity. But if there are no other means to salvation, the outlook for the great mass of mankind is indeed grim. We must also consider the Augustinian and Calvinistic tradition of election. God elects some to salvation but overlooks the great mass of mankind, leaving them to the damnation they deserve. But whether we examine this issue with or without Calvin’s glasses, if Christianity is the only means of escaping damnation, then the evidence of history is overwhelming. For two thousand years God has shown little concern for the great mass of humanity, who did not have the proverbial “snowball’s chance in hell” to escape their appointed fate. And if God has not shown more concern than that for the non-Christian nations, why should we? This logic leads to the Christian right’s “final solution”— a nuclear holocaust. In some cases this catastrophe is eagerly awaited, for it will eliminate the enemies of Christianity. As for the lucky Christians, there is no need for anxiety over the events to take place. As one of them said, “I ain’t gonna be here.” ¹⁰ They will supposedly be “raptured”— a novel idea unknown by Christians until the modern age of Darby and Scofield.

If we believe in and worship a God who is vindictive, cruel and barbaric— who always insists on not only paying back but repaying double or more— then it is inevitable that the darkest passions of the human heart become “sanctified” by religion. In a primitive and more barbaric age, Israel justified wholesale genocide on the premise that they were the chosen people and that their tribal God had commanded them to do it. In their sacred psalms they included prayers which expressed vindictive hate toward the enemies of Israel.

Let them be put to shame and dishonor who seek after my life!
Let them be turned back and confounded who devise evil against me!
Let them be like chaff before the wind,
with the angel of the Lord driving them on! Let their way be dark and slippery;
with the angel of the Lord pursuing them!
—Ps. 35:4-6.

May his children be fatherless,
and his wife a widow!
May his children wander about and beg;

May they be driven out of the ruins they inhabit!
May the creditor seize all that he has;
may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil!
Let there be none to extend kindness to him, nor any to pity his fatherless children!
May his posterity be cut off;
May his name be blotted out in the second generation!
May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the Lord,
and let not the sin of his mother be
blotted out!

—Ps. 109:9-14

O daughter of Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall he be who requites you
with what you have done to us!
Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!
—Ps. 137:8, 9.

Those who surround me lift up their head, let the mischief of their lips overwhelm
them!
Let burning coals fall upon them!
Let them be cast into pits, no more to rise!
—Ps. 140:9, 10.

Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their
hands, to wreak vengeance on the nations and chastisement on the peoples,
to bind their kings with chains and their nobles with fetters of iron,
to execute on them the judgment written! This is glory for all his faithful ones.
Praise the Lord!

—Ps. 149:6-9.

Such expressions gave religious inspiration for Israel's holy wars, where even women and babies were cruelly butchered. We should not gloss over these facts of history just because they are in the Bible any more than we should gloss over the white man's treatment of the American Indians or of the Australian aborigines.

The darkest instincts of human nature, however, find their religious expression (the worst sins are always the religious ones) in the popular and traditional Christian doctrine of hell. Here religious man has imputed to God that which could only have

been conceived out of the unfathomable dregs of human sadism. God the Father and Jesus himself pay back those who reject God's "love" with a vengeance and cruelty so unimaginably horrific that it would make all the men who conducted the Spanish Inquisition and all the Nazis who engineered the gas chambers look like harmless humanitarians. If it is protested that saintly Christians like Calvin, Wesley or Spurgeon believed in such a hell, then we must say that this only proves that human depravity resides in the best of saints. If the truth were known, this single aspect of the Christian religion has caused more decent, honest people to spurn the Christian message than has anything else. We could include in such a list some of the great men who founded the American nation and gave it such a brilliant constitution.

If the reader is a strict Biblicist who feels duty-bound to accept everything in the Bible almost as though it were dictated by Almighty God, we suggest that he read Edward Fudge's book *The Fire That Consumes*. ¹¹ Thank God that, more and more Christian scholars from all sections of the Christian church, are turning from this embarrassingly barbaric idea of hell. Some are doing it openly and marshaling the biblical evidence to support their stand. Others are becoming increasingly conspicuous by what they do not say about the subject because they feel ill at ease with this eschatological monstrosity.

Fudge approaches the subject from the stance of an Inerrantist and at least shows that the overwhelming biblical evidence favors the eventual extinction of the unsaved rather than *never-ending* punishment in some eschatological torture chamber. Fudge believes that all Bible writers must harmonize and express the same view. We are inclined to believe that this is an unverifiable presupposition which may prejudice exegetical objectivity. We would suggest to Fudge that the early Christians expressed a variety of eschatological viewpoints, depending on their religious background, culture and tradition, and that their witness to the one Christ does not exclude the possibility that they held notions which they could not yet see were out of harmony with the spirit of the gospel.

Earlier we commented that some appear to be anxious that the United States and Israel confront those nations who are supposedly blocking the fulfillment of prophecy and God's purpose for Palestine and the world. The voices of the Christian right are sounding increasingly like some kind of nuclear cheering squad. The same stance and the same spirit are manifested in full view of the prospect of hell. God too, it seems, has a hell cheering squad. And if they ever find out as Jonah did, that God has other intentions for the enemies of the elect; they will be as chagrined and resentful about it as Jonah. Some may even think that heaven will no longer be quite so appealing.

The human heart's capacity for cruelty and inhumanity is clearly demonstrated in so many terrible instances of human history. Spare the world from having this dark side of

human nature nurtured and justified by any religion— not excepting the Christian religion.

The gospel brings us a freedom to live in the spirit of the risen Christ. This is a freedom from religious bondage and from allegiance to any teachings which are so obviously inhuman.

Notes and References

Unless otherwise indicated, scriptural quotations are from the Revised Standard Version.

1. Quoted in Robert Jewett, *Christian Tolerance: Paul's Message to the Modern Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), p.9
2. Quoted in Walther Buhlmann, *Gods Chosen Peoples* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books. 1982), p. 70.
3. Ibid., p.124.
4. bid., p. 125.
5. See Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman, *Holy Terror: The Fundamentalist War on Americas Freedom in Religion, Politics, and Our Private Lives* (New York: Dell Publishing Co. 1984).
6. See James Barr, "Religious Fundamentalism," *Current Affairs Bulletin*, 1 June 1982, p. 24.
7. See Grace Halsell, *Prophecy and Politics: Militant Evangelist on the Road to Nuclear War* (Westport, Conn.: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1986).
8. Ibid. p.197.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid. p.39.
11. See Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A biblical and Historical Study of Final Punishment* (Houston: Providential Press, 1982).

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