

What Is Radical Christianity

By: Gary Bauer

“Radical Christianity is just as threatening as radical Islam in a country like America.” Perhaps you remember that pearl from Rosie O’Donnell, the perpetually agitated former co-host of *The View*. While few had put it quite so brusquely, O’Donnell’s sentiment was hardly a novel one. A steady stream of books and films had for years demonized conservative Christians, attacking their rising influence in politics and on broader American life as heralding the establishment of a Christian theocracy.

It was against this backdrop of anti-Christian paranoia that CNN recently aired “*God’s Warriors*,” a mini-series that investigated what animates the most fervent followers of the world’s three major religions.

I’ll spare you the details of the six hour mini-series and get right to the documentary’s central message: Conservative Christians who pray in front of abortion centers and orthodox Jews who settle down to live in Israel pose as much of a threat to freedom-loving Americans as fanatical Muslims who preach hatred of all non-Muslims and send their children off to become suicide bombers. “*God’s Warriors*” trumpets the stale myth that what threatens America is not Islamic extremism but, more broadly, religious fundamentalism of all stripes.

But the notion that radical Christians are as much of a threat to America as radical Muslims is based on a false premise: that radical Christians should be feared.

Merriam Webster defines “radical” as: “of or relating to the origin: fundamental” and “forming a basis or foundation.” The foundation of Christianity is Jesus Christ and His injunction is to “love one another as I have loved you.” In the Gospel of Matthew, a Pharisee tests Jesus with a question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replies, “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the

second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." Love is the foundational virtue in Christians' relationships with God and with other Christians and non-Christians alike.

But "radical" can also mean "extreme," and Christians are explicitly called to an extreme, or radical, love, which, following the example of Jesus on the Cross, has at its core an authentic forgiveness that is to be extended even to our enemies. Understanding that love and forgiveness lie at the heart of Christian faith helps illuminate why Christians respond to attacks against their faith not with violent protests and murderous threats but by "turning the other cheek."

Consider a recent case. When a New Jersey high school held a mock hostage emergency drill for their students, it chose to portray the terrorists as a group of fundamentalist Christians seeking justice after the daughter of one of its members had been expelled for praying before class. Students were further told that the terrorist group, called the New Crusaders, had already gunned down several students and had taken hostages in a classroom.

While the incident provoked the ire of many Christians, no violent protests were held and no death threats were issued. Instead, Christians wrote letters to the editors of their local newspapers and parents voiced their displeasure by writing to the school's principal and the city's mayor.

Perhaps the best recent example of "radical Christianity" was on display in the wake of the Amish school massacre last fall, when mentally disturbed milk truck driver Charles Roberts stormed the West Nickel Mines Amish School in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and tied up and shot 10 girls before killing himself.

What the nation saw in the aftermath of this unfathomable rampage was the core of Christianity, a Christ-like love and forgiveness. While undoubtedly overwhelmed with feelings of anger and sorrow, the entire Amish community

immediately forgave Roberts for his crimes. How did they do it? As one Amish leader explained, "We forgive because God has forgiven us. God extends his forgiveness to us in Christ, then, we must receive it. Once we do, we must share it with others."

For Christians, forgiving one's enemies is not to agree with what they do, or to be deluded into thinking they are nice people when they are not. It means hating the sin but loving the sinner. Anyone would hate what Roberts did. His actions were evil, and love does not diminish our hatred of those acts. In fact, Christians are called to hate the sin precisely because we love the person. And our hate for the sin deepens when we realize what it has done to a person whom God loves and values beyond our comprehension.

In the wake of the school shootings, many commentators seemed surprised that the family and friends of the victims were able to forgive someone who had committed such unspeakable acts of violence. Some even suggested that it was wrong for them to show such forgiveness. But the community's response was the essence of the Christian message. When God commands us to "love one another as I have loved you," He means exactly that. Is it radical? Yes. Is it a threat to America? Hardly.

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