



Learning from a 'church' of hate

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Belief in God is no guarantee of goodness. Piety without ethics -- religious fanaticism -- can be a prescription for great evil, as centuries of religious brutality and bloodshed make all too clear. A millennium ago, Crusaders massacred their victims to the cry of "Deus lo volt!" -- "God wills it!" Islamist radicals exclaim "Allahu Akbar" -- "God is great" -- as they behead innocent hostages and crash airliners into the World Trade Center.

But you don't have to look back into history or to the global jihad for evidence that zealots who care more about God than about goodness bring cruelty and pain into the world. Consider instead the Westboro Baptist Church.

A self-described "Primitive Baptist" congregation led by Fred Phelps, the

Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas is a fringe hate group obsessed with homosexuality. (It is not affiliated with any official Baptist convention.) It numbers only several dozen followers, most of whom are related to each other and who travel the country with picket signs insisting that America has been cursed because of its tolerance for gays.

The essence of what the Westboro members call their "picketing ministry" is mockery of the victims of tragedy, and the cheering of deadly disasters as God's vengeance against the wicked. They [claim](#) that they "used to pray for the good of America" but decided that the nation is beyond redemption. Accordingly, they now "pray daily for more outpourings of God's justice and wrath on this evil, hateful nation" and celebrate "hurricanes, floods,

tornadoes, earthquakes, IEDs, collapsing mines, and more" as instruments of divine wrath.

What the Westboro Church lacks in numbers, it more than makes up in rhetorical poison. Among the messages featured on its pickets are "God Hates Fags," "Thank God for Katrina," "God Hates Your Tears," and "Thank God for the California Fires." The group's [websites](#) proclaim gleefully that the "Utah miners are in hell," as are "the Amish children in Pennsylvania" and "Corretta Scott King . . . with her husband."

Westboro has become especially notorious in recent years for demonstrating at the funerals of US troops killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. "These turkeys are not heroes," one of the group's websites [sneers](#). "They are lazy, incompetent idiots looking for jobs because they're not qualified for honest work. They were raised on a steady diet of fag propaganda in the home, on TV, in church, in school, in mass media. . . . They voluntarily joined a fag-infested army to fight for a fag-run country now utterly and finally forsaken by God who Himself is fighting against that country."

As a legal matter, it is not easy to silence such contemptible spewings. The First Amendment, as [Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote](#), safeguards not just "free thought for those who agree with us, but freedom for the thought that we hate." Several Legislatures have passed laws restricting protests in the vicinity of funerals, but such laws may be vulner-

able on constitutional grounds. They would also have little effect on most Westboro picketing.

A federal jury in Baltimore this week is weighing a different kind of legal challenge. The father of Lance Corporal Matthew Snyder, a 20-year-old Marine killed in Iraq, is [suing the Westboro church](#) for picketing his son's funeral last year with signs reading "God Hates You" and "Thank God for Dead Soldiers." Albert Snyder argues that the picketers' unwanted presence and naked cruelty should be punished as an unlawful invasion of privacy and [intentional infliction of emotional distress](#). (Full details, and a fund to help defray the Snyder family's legal costs, are at [matthewsnyder.org](#).)

But even if it isn't legally possible to stop the Westboro hatemongers, it is possible to learn from them. They offer a vivid demonstration of why belief in God is dangerous if it doesn't include the belief that God's foremost demand is that human beings act with kindness and decency. Fred Phelps and his followers appear to believe fervently in God. Their literature is replete with quotations from the Bible. But the only passages that appear to interest them are those that warn of God's punishment for wicked behavior. Glaringly absent from their signs, websites, and press releases is the central teaching of ethical monotheism -- not just that there is a God, but that God wants men and women to be good to each other. God does not smile on those who taunt victims instead of helping them.

Does the Bible condemn homosexuality? Yes -- but not nearly as often as it condemns those who treat others with cruelty and injustice. Consider, for example, the message of [Exodus 22](#) to those, like the Westboro funeral picketers, who add to the grief of widows and children:

"You shall not afflict any widow or fatherless child. If you afflict them in any way, and they cry at all to Me, I will surely hear their cry, and My wrath will become hot." That passage, for some reason, doesn't seem to be included in the Westboro websites.

To the fanatics from Topeka, no calling is higher than hating homosexuals and anyone who doesn't share that hatred. But the Bible they thump so intolerantly actually teaches something quite different:

"He has shown you, O man, what is good," the prophet [Micah](#) said, in words that echo through the ages. "What does God require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" It is a shining mark in America's favor that the Westboro Baptist Church is so small.