

# What Would Jesus Write?

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TO THE FAR RIGHT CHRISTIAN HATER  
You Can Be a Good Speller or a Hater,  
But You Can't Be Both  
By Bonnie Weinstein  
Rare Bird Books  
224 pages, \$14.95

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BY LAWRENCE SWAIM

**M**ikey Weinstein and his wife, Bonnie, founded the Military Religious Freedom Foundation in 2005, after learning that their son was facing anti-Semitic harassment at the Air Force Academy. The harassment was orchestrated by far-right Christian evangelicals, who had supporters in the academy's administration, as part of a crude campaign to coerce non-Christians into accepting their toxic brand of right-wing Christianity.

This highly organized campaign put enormous pressure on academy cadets. When a lowly cadet receives a "suggestion" from an instructor to attend an evangelical religious service, it has the force of a direct order. Similar evangelical and fundamentalist pressure was being exerted by commanding officers throughout the military.

Mikey, a former Judge-Advocate General [JAG] Air Force officer, exposed these unconstitutional practices, and the MRFF forced the top military brass to curtail them.

In the process, Mikey exposed an entrenched movement of extreme rightwing Christians, many of whom had extraordinary privileges within the Pentagon, and were systematically using the military's command structure to proselytize their religion while punishing those that refused to accept it. By exposing them and interfering with their activities, Mikey and his family became the targets of some truly astonishing far-right Christian haters, a large number of whom regularly send their venomous and near-psychotic hate mail to Mikey and Bonnie Weinstein.

The venomous missives collected in Bonnie Weinstein's book all come from self-identifying Christians, mostly extreme conservatives, most of them veterans or currently serving in the military. The letters

themselves are steeped in anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, and racism, not to mention a rabid loathing of the world around them.

The letter-writers also have an odd tendency to flaunt their ignorance as though it was proof of their spiritual authenticity. Above all they seem to be in a permanent and apoplectic state of war against that vast majority of the world that doesn't share their religious belief system.

In addition to the racial and religious bigotry, the imagery in these letters is highly sexualized, invariably and scurrilously obscene, and – most disturbing of all – extremely violent, often enumerating specific criminal acts they would like to see committed against Mikey and his family members.

Misspellings and run-on sentences abound; the writers apparently can't write fast enough to express the loathing they feel, nor can they stop long enough to correct their mistakes. Indeed, they seem to suffer from a kind of spiritual Tourette's Syndrome, the letters revealing an uncontrollable epistolary pandemonium of the soul.

I view these obscene and shameful letters as strong circumstantial evidence that something has gone very wrong within certain sectors of evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity, certainly among that politicized part that is known as the Religious Right.

Conservative evangelicals increasingly see themselves as part of a political rather than a religious community, perhaps because they are trying to make up with political power for the cultural influence they have lost. But in focusing so closely on rightwing political power, many of these conservative evangelicals embrace a negative attitude toward modernity and an unconscionable extremism that has nothing to do with the message of Jesus.

We saw an example of that recently in Oklahoma, when state Rep. John Bennett, who has repeatedly self-identified as a conservative evangelical Christian, declared Oklahoma's 35,000 Muslims "as bad as ISIS," calling for Islam to be "cut out" of American society.

So how does one "cut out" an entire religion, Rep. Bennett? Concentration camps? Genocide? Or does one just wait for the good old boys to start burning down Mosques, in hopes of driving innocent Muslim families from the state? The latter seems to be the general strategy of some Islamophobes operating in Tennessee.

In reality, wiser and cooler heads should have prevailed when Bennett first initiated his public religious tirades. But there were no such wiser and cooler heads, at least not in the leadership of the Oklahoma Republican Party.

Sadly, the head of the Republican Party in Oklahoma, Dave Weston, endorsed Bennett's Islamophobia – and when the Republican National Committee was asked to dissociate itself from Bennett's dangerous incitement to violence, it responded with a thunderous silence. That silence spoke volumes – and what it told me was that perhaps the RNC was waiting to see how Islamophobia would work in the mid-south during an election year. The RNC were willing, in other words, to try out a neo-fascist strategy in Oklahoma for electoral purposes.

In fairness to the GOP, it should be pointed out that the state Republican organization in Minnesota actually forced the resignation of one of its officials who engaged in an Islamophobic rant. But why didn't the Oklahoma GOP do the same, or the national RNC, in the case of Rep. Bennett? Again, you have to wonder if it had something to do with political calculations regarding this part of the country in an election year.

The history of anti-Semitism in Europe suggests that once religious bigotry gets into a political culture, or the culture of a particu-

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lar political party, it is almost impossible to get it out. In part this happens because some people are desperate for scapegoats. But it's also a political strategy of billionaires, who use it because it's a way of distracting people from the exploitative practices of the corporate

upper class.

Now it seems to have become an electoral strategy of the Oklahoma Republican Party.

Sadly, as the deranged hatefulness of the letters to Mikey and Bonnie Weinstein strongly suggest, Islamophobia – like anti-Semitism

itism – is a powerful influence within the culture of many extreme rightwing evangelical churches. There is even a movement, called Dominionism, which aims to take over all government in the name of their rightwing version of Christianity. It's no accident that Tennessee and Oklahoma, currently the two most Islamophobic states in America, both have a very high percentage of evangelicals.

I'm not saying that all, or even most, evangelical preachers are complicit in this form of systemic evil. I do say, however, that as Americans they have a responsibility to explain to their congregations how religious liberty and faith can work together in a democratic society.

And it is high time, I also maintain, for mainstream Christians to start taking a good look at what their religion is becoming. Many members of the mainstream liberal Protestant denominations have little contact or concern regarding the evangelical and fundamental churches. But what if those churches engage in

political extremism, and those same extremists act and speak in the name of all Christians?

Maybe Muslims aren't the only ones whose religion is being highjacked by people with the intent to do harm.

America faces a big challenge. We must defeat the terrorists who seek to harm us; at the same time, we must militantly and unhesitatingly protect the religious liberty of our Muslim friends and neighbors who are guilty of no crime, in Oklahoma and elsewhere.

If we fail to do the latter – if we fail to protect the First Amendment freedom to worship as one chooses – the terrorists will have won the day, and we will most certainly have lost America.

Lawrence Swaim, a fourth-generation Kansan living in California, is executive director of the Interfaith Freedom Foundation, a public-interest nonprofit and civil rights organization advocating religious liberty for all.

## Redeeming Religious Freedom

### TAKING LIBERTIES

Why Religious Freedom Doesn't Give You The Right To Tell Other People What To Do

By Rob Boston

Prometheus Books

198 pages, \$19.95

BY WANDA JO STAPLETON

Rob Boston's intention in writing this book is to define religious freedom and to show how some others are trying to redefine the concept. His examples are general, but I have used specific examples in Oklahoma to illustrate.

Religious liberty, Boston says, is guaranteed by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which says: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." In other words, the power of the government cannot be used to impose one's theology on anyone else. This is also a clear statement about the separation of church [religion] and state [government].

According to the First Amendment, a monument of the Ten Commandments [Christian religion] cannot be placed at the seat of government [the Oklahoma State Capitol, a public tax-supported institution]. Our state government must represent and serve all the people in Oklahoma, not just those who venerate the Ten Commandments as a holy document.

The clear purpose of displaying the Ten Commandments is to promote one religious view above others.

That act harnesses governmental power to elevate a certain theological perspective to a position of prominence above all others. That's unconstitutional.

David Green, the owner of Hobby Lobby, should not have the right to declare that the presence of birth control in his employees' health care plan is a gross violation of his religious freedom. What violation?

Green can still go to the church of his choice and worship as he chooses. Besides, the Affordable Care Act does not require anyone to use birth control. It merely makes it available, without a copay, through private insurers – insurers who adjust their rates to absorb the cost of birth control because it's cheaper than paying for unplanned births.

We live in a nation of many faiths and of no faith at all. Each of us has the right to make decisions about theology for ourselves. It could be called the "priesthood of the believer."

I remember learning about the "priesthood of the believer" as a teenager during a Training Union class in a Southern Baptist Church at Checotah, OK. That was before the Southern Baptist leadership abandoned this belief.

In conclusion, these debates are not about religious freedom, they are about power – the power to lord it over people in some way.

Wanda Jo Stapleton represented south Oklahoma City in the state House of Representatives from 1986-96.

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