Bible and Guns: Why Soldiers Who Proselytize Strengthen Our Enemies

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Many Americans have expressed shock at news that some U.S. soldiers have been seeking to use their positions of power in Iraq and Afghanistan to preach Christianity. But this does not come as news to Muslims, who have been long aware of these proselytizing efforts at the end of a gun.

The Pentagon's General Order 1 prohibits American troops from attempting to convert people in foreign countries. Nonetheless, this activity has been rampant since the United States military first entered Afghanistan and Iraq. In this month's Harper's Magazine, Jeff Sharlet's article "Jesus killed Mohammed: The Crusade for a Christian Military"provides troubling insight into the efforts of fundamentalist Christian churches to turn our armed forces into a modern-day Knights Templar, fighting infidels on behalf of the Church.

As a person of faith myself, I understand the urge to share spiritual witness. Both Christianity and Islam believe they have a message from God for all humanity, and as a result, believers in both traditions naturally seek to engage others and share their faith. And I have no problem entering into discussions and debate with others on matters of religion. Indeed, it is a healthy part of human discourse. For only through openly examining ideas and beliefs can we as human beings discover what feels spiritually true to us. And when our heart finds something it feels to be true, the urge to share that truth with others is natural and part of the human condition.

But faith proffered at the end of a gun is not the same as spirited discourse between equals. American soldiers are in a position of power - lethal power - over the men, women and children in whose countries they are acting. When an armed man seeks to share his beliefs with you, it is not about spreading enlightenment, but about domination and control. To go into other countries with a rifle in one hand and a Bible in the other, can only create fear, resentment and backlash.

Even worse, the image of the soldier-preacher fits directly into Al-Qaeda's meme that Americans are engaged in a new Crusade to destroy Islam. And to the extent that these fundamentalist churches are allowed to exert influence in our military, our enemies are proven right. Both Muslim extremists and their Christian counterparts seek to ignite a war of civilizations, a zero-sum game in which their ideology will ultimately destroy their adversaries completely.

But I don't believe most Americans share that vision of Christianity, just like most Muslims don't seek to dominate and destroy other religions. And it is now up to people of good will, whatever their beliefs, to work together to prevent this clash of civilizations that the militants among us desire.

The irony of these American churches' efforts to spread Christianity in the Muslim world is that Christianity has been part of the fabric of these nations for centuries. As I discuss in my new novel, *Mother of the Believers*, the Muslim conquest of the Middle East was supported by Christian groups like the Egyptian Copts, who had been oppressed by the Byzantine Church for doctrinal differences. The Muslim leaders guaranteed religious freedom for "the People of the Book," and as a result they were able to attract the support of Middle Eastern Christians who were being terrorized by their fellow believers. Indeed, when the Crusaders took Jerusalem in 1099, they massacred its Christian population, who were seen as traitors for living in friendship with their Muslim neighbors.

In Iraq, an ancient Christian community has been in place for the past 2,000 years. And Iraqi Christians like former Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz rose to positions of power in Saddam's secular regime. With the destruction of Iraq's secular dictatorship by American forces, Muslim extremists have filled the power vacuum, and now Iraq's Christian community is undergoing terrible persecution. About a third of Iraq's 800,000 Christians are believed to have fled overseas since 2003.

That's right - there were almost a million Christians already in Iraq under Saddam, part of a community that has lived in peace with its Muslim

neighbors for over a thousand years. American Christians who supported the Iraq war as an End-Times battle to spread Christianity have ironically created an environment where Christianity is now disappearing from Iraq.

The lesson of these tragic events is that faith is best shared through dialogue built on respect for those who differ from us. It can never be imposed through power, and if it is, it is not faith at all, but mind control. And efforts to control the hearts and minds of others will always fail.

The Holy Qur'an says very clearly in Surah 2:256: "Let there be no compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clear from error."

If what you believe is true, you don't need to use power or manipulation to convince others. So let us lay down our guns and embrace each other as brothers and sisters. The truth will win out in the end. It always does.

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