

The evangelicals who like to giftwrap Islamophobia

The world's largest children's Christmas project has a toxic agenda

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It all sounds innocent enough. Operation Christmas Child "is a unique ministry that brings Christmas joy, packed in gift-filled shoeboxes, to children around the world". Over the past 10 years, 24 million shoeboxes have been delivered, making it the world's largest children's Christmas project. Every US president since Ronald Reagan has packed a shoebox for Operation Christmas Child. In the UK, thousands of schools, churches and youth clubs are doing the same. Some will fill their boxes with dried-out felt tip pens and discarded Barbie amputees. Others spend serious money on the latest GameBoy or Sony Walkman.

But what many parents and teachers don't know is that behind Operation Christmas Child is the evangelical charity Samaritan's Purse. Their aim is "the advancement of the Christian faith through educational projects and the relief of poverty". And a particularly toxic version of Christianity it is. This is the same outfit that targeted eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall and was widely condemned for following US troops into Iraq to claim Muslims for Christ.

It's run by the Rev Franklin Graham - chosen by George Bush to deliver the prayers at his presidential inauguration - who has called Islam "a very wicked and evil religion". Graham, the son of the evangelist Billy Graham, is from the same school of thought as General William Boykin, US deputy undersecretary of defence for intelligence, who described America as waging a holy war against "the idol" of Islam's false god and "a guy called Satan" who "wants to destroy us as a Christian army".

Across the UK, children in multicultural schools are being encouraged to support a scheme that is, quite understandably, deeply offensive to Muslims. Under pressure from those who have complained that Operation Christmas Child is a way of promoting Christian fundamentalism through toys, evangelical literature will now be distributed alongside shoebox parcels from the UK rather than inside them - as if this makes any real difference. Little wonder that such organisations as the fire service in south Wales, which had allowed its depots to be used as collection points for shoeboxes, has decided to suspend its involvement. Other organisations are reconsidering their participation.

What is most resented about Samaritan's Purse is the way it links aid and evangelism. "We have no problem with people going into a country to do evangelical work," said Hodan Hassan, a spokeswoman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations. "But when you mix humanitarian work in a war-torn

country with evangelisation you create a problem. You have desperate people and you have someone who has food in one hand and a Bible in another."

Christian missionaries in 19th-century India used to describe those who came to the mission stations simply for food as "rice Christians". This became a derogatory term for those driven to accept Christianity out of hunger rather than genuine conviction. The accusation is that groups such as Samaritan's Purse are creating a new generation of rice Christians in the Middle East. How might they be stopped? The answer is not quite as simple as erecting a firewall between Christian evangelism and social action. For Christianity is not neatly divisible into theory and practice; it is a form of praxis. Belief and action are ultimately inseparable.

Ironically, it is the story of the good Samaritan that provides one of the most effective put-downs to precisely the sort of Islamophobia displayed by Christian fundamentalists such as Graham. Jesus is asked: "Who is my neighbour?" The moral of the story he tells in response - at least the one most people remember from Sunday school - is that it is the man who is beaten up and left for dead that Jesus points to as our neighbour. Conclusion: we must help those in need.

But that's not the story at all. A man is mugged in the Wadi Qelt between Jerusalem and Jericho. Whereas the religious pass by and do nothing, it is the Samaritan who offers care. Those listening to the story would have despised Samaritans. The words "good" and "Samaritan" just didn't go together. Indeed, theirs would have been the General Boykin reaction: that Samaritans worshipped the idol of a false god. Therefore, in casting the Samaritan as the only passer-by with compassion, Jesus is making an all-out assault on the prejudices of his listeners.

If the story was just about helping the needy, whoever they are, it would have been sufficient to cast the Samaritan as the victim and a Jewish layperson as the person who helped. Crucially, however, the hated Samaritan is held up as the moral exemplar. Conclusion: we must overcome religious bigotry.

The story of the good Samaritan, in the hands of Franklin Graham, is conscripted as propaganda for the superiority of Christian compassion to the brutal indifference of other religions - almost the opposite of the purpose of the story.

What is astonishing is that Christian fundamentalists have managed to persuade millions that their warped version of Christianity is the real thing and that mainstream churches have sold out to the secular spirit of the age. The truth is quite the reverse.

US evangelicals employ a selective biblical literalism to support a theology that systematically confuses the kingdom of God with the US's burgeoning empire. It is no coincidence that the mission fields most favoured by US evangelicals are

also the targets of neo-conservative military ambition. To use Jesus as the rallying cry for a new imperialism is the most shameful reversal of all, for he was murdered by the forces of empire. The cross spoke of Roman power in just the way Black Hawk helicopters speak today of US power.

Schools and churches that are getting their children involved in Operation Christmas Child need to be aware of the agenda their participation is helping to promote. There is, of course, a huge emotional hit in wrapping up a shoebox for a Christmas child. But if we are to teach our children properly about giving, we must wean them off the feel-good factor.

Instead, why not support Christian Aid, which works wherever the need and regardless of religion. Its current campaigns include working with HIV/Aids orphans in Kenya, recycling guns in Mozambique, and highlighting the impact of world trade rules on farmers in Ghana. Sure, we will need to have some rather grown-up conversations with our children if we are to explain some of these things. But that would be time better spent than wrapping up a shoebox. We must get over our fondness for charity and develop a thirst for justice.

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