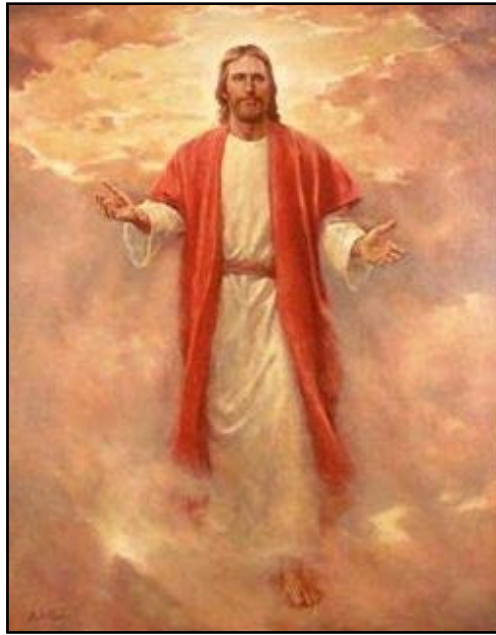


Five Harsh Realities of Being Raised by Christian Fundamentalists

by Timothy Brumbaugh



Ask most Americans what comes to mind when they think of religious fundamentalism and you will likely get a response that includes the words “Muslim” and “ISIS.” I don’t think I’m going too far out on a limb when I suggest “terrorist” as well. This idea of Islam as the devil of religious extremism is naïve, of course, but perhaps not without some justification. Terror attacks seem to have become as American as apple pie and Thanksgiving Day football. According to a Pew Research Center poll conducted last year, concern about Islamic extremism has nearly doubled since 2011, which itself was not exactly a red-letter year in religious harmony. So, while the focus remains firmly on Islam in the global discussions on extremism, there exists a milder, but almost as sinister cousin lurking just under the skin of mainstream Christianity right here in America — it’s an extremism of thought that rarely manifested itself outside the confines of the home. There has been a growing trend in the last decade of this type of thought breaking through the surface and sneaking its way into national politics, influencing the laws that govern our very lives, and seeping into the textbooks our children read every day at school, ensuring its hold on this country’s future. You are probably unaware of how out of touch with reality it really is, and you may be asking yourself, how bad can it really be? After all, millions of Americans go to church every Sunday morning but still hold reasonable views on topics such as science, sex, and the Smurfs.

Hold on, back up a second. Smurfs?

I’ll get to that in a bit, but first I want to make it clear that, although this particular type of Christian may not represent the status quo in modern Christianity, they are not nearly as fringe as one might think. Far from being relegated to rural Mormon communities in Utah or armed cult compounds in Waco, Texas, they are present in the vast majority of neighborhood churches. In fact, they are often the more active church goers with many serving as deacons, elders, preachers, or youth group leaders. Growing up as a preacher’s kid, I thought fringe extremism was normal.

This is what all Christians believe, right? It must be, for the bible, and my daddy, tells me so.

Only now, as a forty-something-year-old former Christian, I have put enough distance between myself and my past that I am able to look back on it with slightly more objective eyes. Christianity looks good when you are all up in it, but step away for a while and take it all in and you can see how messed up it really is. It’s like looking at a Monet, but in reverse. For example:

Everything is about Jesus

There’s an oft-repeated meme on the Internet that your average vegan cannot help but insert their dietary piety into every conversation. Here’s the cringe-worthy joke I’ve often heard: How do you know if you are talking to a vegan? Don’t worry, they’ll tell you. By this metric, I guess I have never talked to a vegan. I have talked to plenty of stoners, though, and the concept is the same. They will relate every topic of conversation to some great pot they smoked years ago, something that happened when they bought pot once, or an experience they had while high on pot.

Conservative Christian Fundamentalists (hereafter called CCFs) are like stoners for Jesus. Every interest, every conversation, every thought must link

back in some way to Jesus, God, or the Bible. This may seem like harmless fandom, like the way I seem to be able to relate everything that happens in my life to some episode of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, but CCFs let this passion rule every decision they make, from what they watch on TV to who they vote for.

When I was ten, way back in 1985, *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* was at the height of its popularity. The cartoon was on every afternoon after school and the action figures were badass. Unlike the wimpy *Star Wars* figures, the He-Man action figures were huge by comparison, with giant swords, even larger muscles, and tiny loin cloths. On his first viewing of the cartoon, my father managed to get halfway through before declaring it satanic and promptly banning it. So what was the reason? The muscular yet somehow skeletal bad guy gives him bad vibes? Was it the magical ghost that would damn me for eternity? How about the homoeroticism of the main character? No, no, and, you guessed it, no. Had my father watched more than the first five minutes it is no doubt these issues would have led to a swift ban hammer coming down to crush my flowering vision of human masculinity, but he couldn’t make it that far. No, He-Man was exiled from my home because of his catch phrase, “I have the power.” “Only Jesus,” my dad declared angrily, “has the power.”

I know what you’re thinking. This hardly seems sinister or dangerous. And, as an isolated incident, you may have a point. But Jesus infected every single area of our lives. You have a book report for school? Better get a book from your father’s library. Here’s a good one by **Jerry Falwell**. Your school will be teaching evolution? Better homeschool you from now on. Every bit of food had to be blessed, we invoked his name every time we got in the car; pictures and paintings of Jesus hung on every wall as a reminder that he is

always watching us. As a child I was told by my parents that their love for Jesus was more important, and greater than, the love they felt for us kids. If you have children of your own, think about that the next time you put them to bed. Then do what I do: hug them tighter and tell them you love them more than anything else in the world. And if being told that an invisible Peeping Tom is the only guy who will love you unconditionally isn't bad enough, life gets infinitely more terrifying when you are told that...

There are demons everywhere

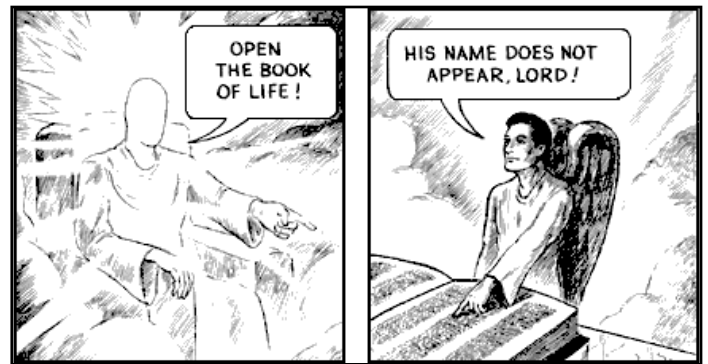
When I was a child I would often imagine that if I had magical glasses that could see all the invisible demons in the world (because demons must be invisible), it would make a walk through a public library look like a field trip to downtown Fallujah — literally Hell on Earth. Because if you were to ask my parents, that's what the ethereal world of demons looks like, and it is all around us. To many CCFs, everybody who is not a true born-again Christian is walking around with demons hanging off of them like ornaments on Beelzebub's Christmas tree. There are demons for everything, too. Demons of lust and fornication are major players, but don't forget the D-list little devils like the demon of nail biting and the demon of knuckle cracking. Better not high-five anyone while you're at it either. Many CCFs believe in transference of demons by physical contact. That weird coworker who won't shake your hand because he says he's a germaphobe might just be afraid of getting your demon of nose picking.

When my first daughter was born my mother-in-law (at the time) refused to hold her because I had named her **Elora Danan**, after the baby from the 1988 movie *Willow*. According to her logic, *Willow* was a satanic movie and she was worried about getting my newborn daughter's demons that, like rats on the Titanic, apparently hitched a ride on her name.

But demon influence doesn't end with people you can physically touch. Demons are in everything that is not ordained by the church. The secular world is one big orgy of evil spirits whose one goal in their eternal life is to find any way into the lives of children. According to **Phil Phillips**, uber-Christian and author of the insanely paranoid book *Turmoil in the Toy Box*, He-Man, Voltron, and Care Bears (just to name a few) are the Devil's High Occupancy Vehicle lane to our kid's souls. No cartoon is too innocuous to escape denunciation. When my parents banished the Smurfs, it was at the insistence that the word "smurf" was a Turkish word that meant "little blue demon," and Gargamel and Azriel were Hebrew names for demonic figures in the Bible. Admittedly, it was harder in the 80s to fact check, but a cursory glance through Google indicates that "smurf" is a corruption of the word Schtroumpf, a nonsensical French word, and Azriel, although Hebrew in origin, means "The Help of God." Hardly a demonic-sounding name at all. Oh, and Gargamel? A masculinization of the name Gargamelle, a character in a 16th century book by **Francois Rabelais**. Neither Gargamel nor Azriel are even mentioned in the Bible. But what real harm can these demons do to children, apart from acting like a goateed Jiminy Cricket from a mirror universe, whispering bad thoughts into virgin ears? Nothing unless you believe that...

Magic is real

This is a tough one to swallow, folks. This is the revelation that usually elicits the most incredulous looks and disbelieving sneers. I can see you right now, your hands on your hips, lips pursed to the side, one eye half closed. You have just put on your "skepticles" and you think I'm bullshitting you now. Well, my friends, if you don't believe me, look up an artist by the name of **Jack Chick**. You've probably seen his miniature comics, the *Chick Tracts*, sitting on grocery store shelves, littered there by some well-meaning Christian who hopes it might lead someone to the Lord. "This Was Your Life" is by far his most popular. It is a comic strip that recounts the life of a sinner who has died and gone to face the judgment of God and is forced to watch as the Almighty replays all the nasty stuff he's done in his time on Earth, including one time when he watched a woman walk down the street and thought to himself, "Mmmm, Nice!"



I hope the good Lord has plenty of popcorn when my movie is played. It'll be a doozy. As hilariously out-of-touch as that particular comic is, it is nothing compared to the one titled "Dark Dungeons." In that track, an innocent-looking pony-tailed girl named Debbie becomes hooked on playing Dungeons and Dragons. In her Dungeons and Dragons group she learns how to cast fireballs and mind control spells. She is inducted into a satanic witch's coven, and loses the mundane name of Debbie, taking on the fabulous alias Elfstar.

Now, when I say that Debbie, or Elfstar, learns to cast fireballs and mind control spells, I'm not talking about in the game. She learns to cast them in real life, because that's the danger of Dungeons and Dragons, folks. You will learn how to really cast spells. And this Chick crackpot isn't some statistical outlier, either. My dad's revival seminars were full of young men who were all too eager to share their harrowing experiences in the grip of pen and paper role-playing games, each of whom had experiences similar to poor Elfstar — I mean, Debbie. I cannot recall as a kid believing in anything as prominently satanic, as preeminently wicked and hellish, as Dungeons and Dragons. I could not understand how anyone could allow this product to be manufactured and sold. Could the world really not see how malevolent it was?

I was an adult when Harry Potter books became popular. During my Young Adult Fiction class in college the discussion of *The Sorcerer's Stone* turned to the question of how does one convince religious people that Harry Potter is not evil? "Tell them that Harry is a good guy!" "Yeah, he uses his magic for good!" I argued that it was no use trying,

because you are dealing with people who literally believe that kids will learn how to cast spells and turn to witchcraft. This, they argue, is the Devil's back door into your child's private life. This is Satan's gateway drug, his marijuana. Hook 'em on something that seems tame and even good, but it eventually leads them down the path of Satan worship and witch's covens. Then they are on their way to conjuring demons at will and sacrificing babies on the altar of the Angel of Darkness. I wish that was hyperbole.

If my childhood seems dark and bleak, it was. You don't exercise that much control over a child's actions and thoughts by taking a feel-good approach to religion. The only way to dominate a child's life so thoroughly is to immerse them in a...

Culture of Fear

I was raised to be afraid of everything that was not of the Bible. If it is secular, it is a potential vehicle for Satan. This cultivated fear became such a perennial component of my character that I still struggle to this day to rid myself of its specter, but, like an annoying sitcom neighbor, it's never gone for long and will come busting through the door at the most inopportune times.

When we were little, my sisters and I had been threatened with eternal damnation to Hell so often it became our catch phrase. If I saw one of them doing something wrong I would gleefully inform them that they were definitely going to hell. I would say loudly, "You're going to Hell!" My sisters would yell back, "Nu-uh, you're going to Hell!" There was a "heated" back and forth until one of us would finally give up the debate.

The threat of being cast into the Lake of Fire as a sinner was a potent bluff. Especially when damn near everything could damn you to an existence of endless torment. The list of wicked things was almost as infinite as the afterlife. School dances were out of the question.

I remember being forced to hide in my parent's bedroom on Halloween with all the lights off reading the Bible by candlelight, because to give candy to trick-or-treaters was to glorify the Devil.

My parents heard satanic lyrics in *Smells Like Teen Spirit*. Theaters playing the movie *Ghostbusters* became terrorized by demons. Care Bears brought the wickedness of happiness without Jesus to children everywhere. Something was wrong with Rainbow Bright. I don't even remember what anymore. People who smoked cigarettes or had tattoos were going to Hell. MTV, video games, Transformers — all satanic.

I distinctly remember my mother telling me that if **Walter Mondale** won the presidency, he would send children to live at school and we would only be allowed to come home on the weekends. I prayed furiously for **Ronald Reagan** to win. I don't think I ever prayed so hard for anything in my life.

Hell was, for my parents, the greatest parenting tool in their arsenal. Fear would keep us in line. Fear would hold us on the right path. Fear would save us from the outside world. Which brings me to my final point, which is...

People on the outside can't tell

Being a preacher wasn't my father's only profession when I was growing up. Sometimes he would take on the

dreaded secular job when preaching wasn't paying the bills. He occasionally worked as an insurance salesman or retail and fast food manager. I would sometimes go to visit him at work. I would wait in the lobby of the Burger King or Kentucky Fried Chicken and wait for his shift to end. It astounded me that he wouldn't preach to his employees. He didn't talk about Jesus with his bosses. The people in the outside world were completely unaware of my family's extreme beliefs.

As I got older, I came to realize that even many members of the church's congregation didn't know the extent of his fervor. Some did, of course. The church leaders. The visiting pastors. The revival speakers. They were kindred spirits. They knew it. They fostered it. They cultivated it.

This is what I believe is so sinister and deceptive about the Conservative Fundamentalist brand of Christianity. They know how to hide it from people. They are completely self-aware enough to know that their views are not exactly mainstream, so they keep quiet about them outside of their specialized circles of fellow believers. This stifles any critique or criticism of their belief. It eliminates the need for any self-reflection or critical thinking. We lived in a self-contained universe without dissent that thrived on fear, shame, and coerced fidelity to an angry, malicious, and vengeful god. The parallels that this belief system has with the organization and thought processes of adherents to radical Islam are striking. And that is truly terrifying. ♦



About the author: *Timothy Brumbaugh* is a native of southern California, but has called many places home while serving in the United States Army. It was during that time when he abandoned religion in favor of skepticism and freethought.

Brumbaugh is currently working as an educator in the Texas public school system. When he is not teaching English to high school students he enjoys scuba diving, archery, playing video games, and writing.