



The Radical Christian Right Is Built on Suburban Despair

By Chris Hedges, AlterNet

Posted on January 19, 2007, Printed on January 19, 2007

<http://www.alternet.org/story/46908/>

The engine that drives the radical Christian Right in the United States, the most dangerous mass movement in American history, is not religiosity, but despair. It is a movement built on the growing personal and economic despair of tens of millions of Americans, who watched helplessly as their communities were plunged into poverty by the flight of manufacturing jobs, their families and neighborhoods torn apart by neglect and indifference, and who eventually lost hope that America was a place where they had a future.

This despair crosses economic boundaries, of course, enveloping many in the middle class who live trapped in huge, soulless exurbs where, lacking any form of community rituals or centers, they also feel deeply isolated, vulnerable and lonely. Those in despair are the most easily manipulated by demagogues, who promise a fantastic utopia, whether it is a worker's paradise, fraternite-egalite-liberte, or the second coming of Jesus Christ. Those in despair search desperately for a solution, the warm embrace of a community to replace the one they lost, a sense of purpose and meaning in life, the assurance they are protected, loved and worthwhile.

During the past two years of work on the book *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*, I kept encountering this deadly despair. Driving down a highway lined with gas stations, fast food restaurants and dollar stores I often got vertigo, forgetting for a moment if I was in Detroit or Kansas City or Cleveland. There are parts of the United States, including whole sections of former manufacturing centers such as Ohio, that resemble the developing world, with boarded up storefronts, dilapidated houses, pot-hole streets and crumbling schools. The end of the world is no longer an abstraction to many Americans.

Jeniece Learned is typical of many in the movement. She stood, when I met her, amid a crowd of earnest-looking men and women, many with small gold crosses in the lapels of their jackets or around their necks, in a hotel lobby in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. She had an easy smile and a thick mane of black, shoulder length hair. She was carrying a booklet called "Ringing in a Culture of Life." The booklet had the schedule of the two day event she is attending organized by The Pennsylvania Pro-Life Federation. The event was "dedicated to the 46 million children who have died from legal abortions since 1973 and the mothers and fathers who mourn their loss."

Learned, who drove five hours from a town outside of Youngstown, Ohio was raised Jewish. She wore a gold Star of David around her neck with a Christian cross inserted in the middle of the design. She stood up in one of the morning sessions,

attended by about 300 people, most of them women, when the speaker, Alveda King, niece of Dr. Martin Luther King, asked if there were any "post-abortive" women present. Learned ran a small pregnancy counseling clinic called Pregnancy Services of Western Pennsylvania in Sharon, where she attempted to talk young girls and women, most of them poor, out of abortions.

She spoke in local public schools, promoting sexual abstinence, rather than birth control, as the only acceptable form of contraception. And she had found in the fight against abortion, and in her conversion, a structure, purpose and meaning that previously eluded her. The battle against abortion is one of the Christian Rights's most effective recruiting tools. It plays on the guilt and shame of woman who had the abortions, accusing them of committing murder, and promising redemption and atonement in the "Christian" struggle to make abortion illegal, in the fight for life against "the culture of death."

Her life, before she was saved, was, like many in this mass movement, chaotic and painful. Her childhood was stolen from her. She was sexually abused by a close family member. Her mother periodically woke Learned and her younger sister and two younger brothers in the middle of the night to flee landlords who wanted back rent. The children were bundled into the car and driven in darkness to a strange apartment in another town. Her mother worked nights and weekends as a bartender. Learned, the oldest, often had to run the home. Her younger sister, who was sexually abused by another member of the family, eventually committed suicide as an adult, something Learned also considered. As a teenager she had an abortion.

She was taking classes at Pacific Christian College several years later when she saw an anti-abortion film called *The Silent Scream*. "You see in this movie this baby backing up trying to get away from this suction tube," she said. "And, its mouth is open and it is like this baby is screaming. I flipped out. It was at that moment that God just took this veil that I had over my eyes for the last eight years. I couldn't breathe. I was hyperventilating. I ran outside. One of the girls followed me from Living Alternative. And she said, 'Did you commit your life to Christ?' And I said, 'I did.' And she said, 'Did you ask for your forgiveness of sins?' And I said, 'I did.' And she goes, 'Does that mean all your sins, or does that mean some of them?' And I said, 'I guess it means all of them.' So she said, 'Basically, you are thinking God hasn't forgiven you for your abortion because that is a worse sin than any of your other sins that you have done.'"

The film brought her into the fight to make abortion illegal. Her activism became atonement for her own abortion. She struggled with depression after she gave birth to her daughter Rachel. When she came home from the hospital she was unable to care for her infant. She thought she saw an 8-year-old boy standing next to her bed. It was, she is sure, the image of the son she had murdered.

"I started crying and asking God over and over again to forgive me," she says. "I had murdered His child. I asked Him to forgive me over and over again. It was just incredible. I was possessed. On the fourth day I remember hearing God's voice. 'I have your baby, now get up!' It was the most incredibly freeing and peaceful moment. I got up and I showered and I ate. I just knew it was God's voice."

In the United States we have turned our backs on the working class, with much of the worst assaults, such as NAFTA and welfare reform, pushed through during President Clinton's Democratic administration. We stand passively and watch an equally pernicious assault on the middle class. Anything that can be put on software, from architecture to engineering to finance, will soon be handed to workers overseas who will be paid a third what their American counterparts receive and who will, like some 45 million Americans, have no access to health insurance or benefits.

There has been, along with the creation of an American oligarchy, a steady Weimarization of the American working class. The top one percent of American households have more wealth than the bottom 90 percent combined. This figure alone should terrify all who care about our democracy. As Plutarch reminded us "an imbalance between the rich and poor is the oldest and most fatal ailment of all republics."

The stories believers such as Learned told me of their lives before they found Christ were heart breaking. These chronicles were about terrible pain, severe financial difficulties, struggles with addictions or childhood sexual or physical abuse, profound alienation and often thoughts about suicide. They were chronicles without hope. The real world, the world of facts and dispassionate intellectual inquiry, the world where all events, news and information were not filtered through this comforting ideological prism, the world where they were left out to dry, abandoned by a government hostage to corporations and willing to tolerate obscene corporate profits, betrayed them.

They hated this world. And they willingly walked out on this world for the mythical world offered by these radical preachers, a world of magic, a world where God had a divine plan for them and intervened on a daily basis to protect them and perform miracles in their lives. The rage many expressed to me towards those who challenge this belief system, to those of us who do not accept that everything in the world came into being during a single week 6,000 years ago because it says so in the Bible, was a rage born of fear, the fear of being plunged back into a reality-based world where these magical props would no longer exist, where they would once again be adrift, abandoned and alone.

The danger of this theology of despair is that it says that nothing in the world is worth saving. It rejoices in cataclysmic destruction. It welcomes the frightening advance of global warming, the spiraling wars and violence in the Middle East and the poverty and neglect that have blighted American urban and rural landscapes as encouraging signs that the end of the world is close at hand.

Believers, of course, clinging to this magical belief, which is a bizarre form of spiritual Darwinism, will be raptured upwards while the rest of us will be tormented with horrors by a warrior Christ and finally extinguished. This obsession with apocalyptic violence is an obsession with revenge. It is what the world, and we who still believe it is worth saving, deserve.

Those who lead the movement give their followers a moral license to direct this rage and yearning for violence against all those who refuse to submit to the movement, from liberals, to "secular humanists," to "nominal Christians," to intellectuals, to

gays and lesbians, to Muslims. These radicals, from James Dobson to Pat Robertson, call for a theocratic state that will, if it comes to pass, bear within it many of the traits of classical fascism.

All radical movements need a crisis or a prolonged period of instability to achieve power. And we are not in a period of crisis now. But another catastrophic terrorist attack on American soil, a series of huge environmental disasters or an economic meltdown will hand to these radicals the opening they seek. Manipulating our fear and anxiety, promising to make us safe and secure, giving us the assurance that they can vanquish the forces that mean to do us harm, these radicals, many of whom have achieved powerful positions in the Executive and legislative branches of government, as well as the military, will ask us only to surrender our rights, to pass them the unlimited power they need to battle the forces of darkness.

They will have behind them tens of millions of angry, disenfranchised Americans longing for revenge and yearning for a mythical utopia, Americans who embraced a theology of despair because we offered them nothing else.

Chris Hedges, a graduate of Harvard Divinity School and former Pulitzer-prize winning foreign correspondent for The New York Times, is the author of American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America.

© 2007 Independent Media Institute. All rights reserved.
View this story online at: <http://www.alternet.org/story/46908/>