

The Ugly Christian

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Remember *The Ugly American*? First the book and then the movie with Marlon Brando? Well, now we have the ugly Christian. Seriously, the country is full of Christians whose brand of love is just plain ugly. They are judgmental, censorious, pushy, arrogant, and rude. They are loud, boisterous, and nose-y. Guess what? I need a twelve-step program for ugliness. “My name is Rodney, and I’m an ugly Christian. I am often critical of those who disagree with me.” Is there a way we can overcome this ugliness and return to the world of truth, beauty, and mutual respect?

The ugly Christian, like a starving carnivore, feasts on the presumed sins of others. They are like Pharisees: blue-nosed busybodies. The sins they concentrate on are so microscopic, so petty, and so none of their business. Yet if you talk to an ugly Christian, he assures you of his love. He reminds you that he didn’t write the Bible, and he is obligated to enforce what the Good Book says. A sincere and earnest woman preacher with a large television audience assured an interviewer that she loved the Jews. When asked if her theology of the rapture, which includes the destruction of almost all the Jews, made her declaration of love false, she smiled and said, “That’s not me talking. I’m just telling you what God says.” How can such ugliness – a divinely sponsored holocaust – come from such a pretty face?

I have no doubt that the ugly Christian acts out of a perception of love. In fact, Christians have one refrain when they are criticized for the way they treat others. For example, when the ugly Christian talks about gays, he will insist, “I love gays.” Fred Phelps, of godhatesfags.com swears he is the only person in America that actually loves gays. This Kansas preacher, who unfortunately bills himself as a Baptist, is so ugly he must have been attacked by the entire ugly forest.

I also, if questioned about my frequent disdain for fundamentalism, say that I am acting in love. I will insist that it’s nothing personal. Yet, I know that when it comes to religion, it’s always personal. For the ways that I am complicit in spreading the ugliness, I apologize. My purpose is to call attention to the ugliness and find ways we can all move beyond it.

I know. Christians will be offended by my thoughts. In that sense I am being an ugly Christian. That is not my intention. Ugliness has no party loyalty. Liberals and conservatives are capable of spewing intolerance and disrespect. I know that many well-intentioned Christians are trying to protect the morals and values of our country. I have no doubt of the sincerity of these deeply concerned and easily offended Christians. They have correctly called attention to the fact that we are a troubled society. I am aware of how much my own language can be dismissive, elitist, and jarring. My purpose is to invite all religious people into the conversation, so that we can all concentrate on how to promote beauty and truth instead of ugliness.

Still not buying it? Well, talk to some of the people who have been damaged by us ugly Christians. Talk to people hurt and marginalized by religion. Interview a gay man whose parents and church keep sending him away to retreats where they try to use spiritual power to

make him go straight. Talk to a divorced woman who feels excluded and alone because her church has labeled her unworthy.

Talk to members of our community who are Jewish or Muslim or Buddhist. Talk to them and learn of the prejudice they face, the humiliation, the condescension, and the patronization. Ask a conservative Christian how it feels to be treated as an ignorant anti-intellectual. Ask a liberal how it feels to be called an unbeliever.

How can we tell if we are ugly Christians? Well if we are short-sighted, conceited, and power-hungry, chances are we are among the ugly. If we are arrogant, rude, and pushy, we should count ourselves as ugly Christians. If we believe we have the absolute truth and everybody else is wrong, if we are zealous, judgmental, and harsh, if we are always filled with anger at others, if we demonize everyone we don't like with devil terms like "radical feminist," "liberal," "gay lover," "socialist," "unbeliever," "fundamentalist," "right wing radical" – if we are any of these or all of them, we are ugly Christians. If we are unwilling to grant the possibility of being wrong and others being right, we are piling on the ugliness.

The increasing ugliness among Christians causes me great pain, because I believe religion is still our best hope. In writing these thoughts, I have participated in the spirit of ugliness and I repent of my sin. Perhaps the title of this article should be, "One Ugly Christian to Another." Yet I feel that religious people must be aware of the ways in which we come across to other people. We could do so much more good if we would not turn off so many people with our mean and ugly spirits. Let the beauty treatment begin for all of us. I have an appointment at 10:15 Wednesday morning.