

THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE

**“WHAT IF THE AMISH
WERE IN CHARGE
OF THE WAR ON TERROR”**

By

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“What If the Amish Were in Charge of the War on Terror?”

On October 2, 2006, Charles Carl Roberts IV carried his guns and his twisted anger into an Amish schoolhouse near the little town of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. In the end, eight young Amish girls died in a hail of gunfire, and two others were seriously injured.

You may dimly recall this oddly horrific incident of American domestic violence. As the Amish scholars, Kraybill, Nolt and Weaver-Zercher note in their wonderful book called *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy*, “Roberts [the killer] shattered a reassuring American myth [that day] — that the Old Order Amish remain isolated from the problems of the larger world.”¹

A religious consultant and author, Diana Butler Bass, nicely summarizes the truly astonishing Amish response to this tragedy. “I confess,” Bass begins,

Over the last ten days, I did not pay much attention to the Amish school shooting. As the mother of an eight-year old girl, I find school violence stories too painful to follow.

Despite attempts to avoid this particular news, the stories of the Amish practice of forgiveness eventually captivated me. Their practice of forgiveness unfolded in four public acts over the course of a week. First, some elders visited Marie Roberts, the wife of the murderer, to offer forgiveness. Then, the families of the slain girls invited the widow to their own children’s funerals. Next, they requested that all relief monies intended for Amish families [that were pouring in from all over the United States] be shared with [the killer’s widow, Marie] Roberts and her children. And, finally, in an astonishing act of reconciliation, more than 30 members of the Amish community attended the funeral of the killer.²

Now, many religious traditions consider forgiveness to be a virtue, but Christianity has placed it in particularly high regard. When the Apostle Peter asks Jesus whether forgiving an offense seven times is sufficient, Jesus responds by saying, no, seventy times seven would be closer to the mark. And Jesus, you will recall, in one of his last utterances, asked God to forgive those who had crucified him — even as he hung on the cross.

So, forgiveness is a virtue, a spiritual practice, that Christianity holds in particularly high regard. It’s like compassion to Buddhism. But different strains of Christianity emphasize different aspects of the Christian faith. For Roman Catholics, for instance, it is the Eucharist (Holy Communion) that is of central importance. For the Pentecostals, it is the work of the Holy Spirit. For the Protestants, it is the Word — it is the Good News — of Christianity that is central.

Well, for the Amish, together with the Mennonites, both from what is called the Anabaptist tradition, “discipleship” is of central importance to the practice of their faith. Discipleship in this context means those who would themselves become disciples, in effect, of Jesus by following — or even imitating — as best they can the life of Jesus. This accounts, in part, then, for the simple lifestyle of the Amish, as they seek to be faithful followers of Jesus.

Now, because Christianity holds forgiveness in high regard, and because the Amish are steeped in a deep tradition of “discipleship,” consequently the Amish place forgiveness very high on their list of spiritual practices. Indeed, some say that forgiveness is central to the Amish Way. As one young Amish minister who runs a painting business put it, “That’s what the Bible is all about: forgiveness.”

Indeed, when scholars investigating the Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania tragedy asked the Amish about examples of forgiveness, lots of contemporary examples were mentioned. The newly wed Sarah, for example, who was killed while riding in her horse and buggy by a 17-year-old, Joel, who recklessly attempted to blow by her at 70 miles per hour on a

¹ Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher, *Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2007), p. xi.

² Bass, Diana Butler, “What if the Amish were in charge of the war on terror?” October 11, 2006, published by *Sojourner’s Magazine* and reprinted widely.

narrow country road in his AMC Concorde station wagon. Sarah's parents, Sarah's new husband and many other family members quickly sought out 17-year-old Joel and forgave him.³

In addition to lots of contemporary examples of forgiveness, many of the Amish being interviewed by the Amish scholars mentioned a story about "the guy who ran across the ice." Although not everyone could recall the story's details, all knew the general outline – and the Amish moral – of this dramatic account of forgiveness. They all knew it because the Amish tradition is steeped in stories of forgiveness and its power, and this is one of their favorite stories.

As the three authors of the book *Amish Grace* tell it,

The guy who ran across the ice was Dirk Willems, a Dutch Anabaptist who was arrested in 1569 for being baptized as an adult and [for] allowing forbidden religious gatherings to be held in his home. Jailed in a palace-turned-prison, Willems escaped by knotting rags into a rope and lowering himself out a window of the castle. But his getaway would not be easy. A guard noticed the prisoner's flight and began pursuing him, apparently with the mayor in tow. As they ran, Willems came to a frozen pond, and although he made it safely across, the ice was beginning to break up with the spring thaw. The hapless guard fell through the ice, and began to sink. Fearing he would drown, the guard cried out for Willems to turn back and rescue him.

Here Amish storytellers often pause for effect: listeners are to consider Dirk Willems' options and reflect on their own ethical instincts.

Did the guard's fall through the ice provide a path of escape, a providential means of saving Willems, for which the Anabaptist escapee should praise God? Should Willems keep running and leave the mayor to save his employee from the icy waters? Was it even practical for Willems to try to help his pursuer, since the pond's surface might easily collapse under his weight and leave them both to drown?

The narrative tension only increases as the story continues. Willems stopped, turned around, and went back to save his pursuer's life. Willems literally extended his hand to his enemy and carefully pulled him to safety. Unlike stories commending soldiers who sacrifice their lives for their comrades or parents who forfeit health and wealth for their children, this story lauds a man for risking his life for his mortal enemy.

The story's conclusion drives the point home: no sooner had Willems saved the guard than the mayor caught him and insisted on having him burned at the stake.

The execution, however, was bungled – a strong wind briefly blew the flames away from Willem's upper body – but of course that only made his death more torturous. *Martyrs Mirror*, [the classic Amish book in which Willems story is told,] reports that the wind carried Willem's voice to the next village, where residents heard him cry out more than seventy times. "Seventy times!" the *Martyrs Mirror* study guide underscores. "Peter asked Jesus if he should forgive one who sinned against him, and Jesus said not seven times, 'but seventy times seven.' [Indeed,] Dirk forgave his enemies many times."

Such, then, is a little insight, hopefully, into the Amish tradition of Christianity with their emphasis on being disciples of Jesus and, thus, with their particular emphasis on forgiveness.

II

Let us turn now to what the United States has done with its self-proclaimed "War on Terror."

³ Kraybill, op. cit., pp. 72-73.

First, let me turn to one of my favorite *New York Times* columnists, Bob Herbert, for a quick reality check on what our war in Iraq means up close and personal.

Bryan Anderson, a 25-year-old Army sergeant who was wounded in Iraq, was explaining, on camera . . . what happened immediately after a roadside bomb blew up the Humvee that he was driving.

“I was like, ‘Oh, we got hit. We got hit.’ And then I had blood on my face and the flies were landing all over my face. So I wiped my face to get rid of the flies. And that is when I noticed that my fingertip was gone. So I was like, ‘Oh. O.K.’

“So that is when I started really assessing myself. I was like, ‘[Okay,] that’s not bad.’ And then I turned my hand over, and I noticed that this chunk of my hand was gone. So I was like, ‘O.K., still not bad. I can live with that.’

“And then when I went to wipe the flies [off] my face with my left hand, there was nothing there. So I was like, ‘Uh, that’s gone.’ And then I looked down — and I saw that my legs were gone. And then they had kind of forced my head back down to the ground, hoping that I wouldn’t see.”⁴

Friends, over 30,000 Americans, like Army Sergeant Bryan Anderson, have been wounded in Iraq, many grievously. Many more suffer debilitating nightmares, post traumatic stress, and worse.

Moreover, over 4,000 Americans have died in Iraq.

Anywhere from 60,000 to well over one million Iraqis have died.

The number of wounded, disabled and displaced Iraqis is practically incalculable.

While good people may honestly disagree about such things — and in this church it is critically important that we remember that — in my judgment, this is a war which was totally unnecessary. Indeed, numerous independent analyses and reports conclude that this is a war that the Bush administration carefully sold to the American public as part of an orchestrated campaign that effectively, but deceptively galvanized public opinion about the national security threat posed by Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and, in the process, led this nation to war under decidedly false pretenses. One report I read details 532 separate occasions — and 935 statements — in the two years after 9/11 when President George Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and five other high administration officials stated unequivocally that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction,⁵ links to Al Qaeda, or both.⁶

It is now beyond dispute that Iraq had neither.

Meanwhile, in addition to the human cost of this unnecessary war, the War in Iraq is currently costing us a whopping \$720 million dollars a day. Yes, \$720 million dollars every day. That’s \$500,000 a minute.⁷ That’s a million dollars every two minutes! Just think of what we could do with that kind of money. . . .

In short, in my judgment, this war is utterly scandalous — from its trumped up inception, to its broadly incompetent prosecution, to its staggering human and financial cost, to its never-ending conclusion. It’s scandalous!

Already, our war in Iraq has lasted longer than the American Civil War, the Spanish-American War, the Korean War, WWI, WWII, and the Persian Gulf War. (Only the Vietnam War and the Revolutionary War lasted longer.)

This is a travesty.

⁴ Herbert, Bob, “War’s Chilling Reality,” *The New York Times*, August 21, 2007, p. A23.

⁵ Or was trying to either produce or obtain weapons of mass destruction.

⁶ Lewis, Charles and Reading-Smith, Mark, “False Pretenses,” The Center for Public Integrity, available on the Internet.

⁷ These statistics come from the American Friends Service Committee in their analysis of the work done by Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph E. Stiglitz and Harvard public finance lecturer Linda J. Bilmes. These statistics include not only the immediate costs of war but also ongoing factors such as long-term health care for veterans, interest on debt and replacement of military hardware.

Additionally, adding insult to injury, the current administration's "War on Terror" has effectively condoned widespread torture and mistreatment of prisoners. Indeed, a painful new report came out just this week by the Justice Department's inspector general, based on the accounts of hundreds — not just a few individuals, but *hundreds* — of FBI agents, documenting not just episodic, isolated cases, but the widespread use of torture in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Guantanamo, Cuba. It's a terrible indictment of America! And it is clearly in violation of both the Geneva Conventions and our own domestic law.

As a result of all of this, among other things, the international reputation of the United States of America among both our allies and our antagonists has been grievously sullied.

And, finally, in the mind-boggling height of tragic irony, our "War on Terror," few will dispute, has actually created and mobilized far more terrorists than we faced to begin with!

III

What to do?

To paraphrase Bob Herbert, writing in *The New York Times*, but from a different column than the one I quoted from before:

"Look around and ask yourself [says Herbert] if you believe that establishing democracy in Iraq, or ridding Iraq of Saddam Hussein, or ridding Iraq of its weapons of mass destruction — or whatever goal you choose to assert as the reason for this war — is worth the life of your son or your daughter, or your husband or your wife, or the co-worker who rides to the office with you in the morning, or your friendly neighbor next door? In other words, is our presence in Iraq something that you [or I] would be willing to die for? Or to send one of [our] friends or relatives to die for?"⁸

Now, even if we say no, I realize that there is this. We are told that we just can't up and leave Iraq. We just can't! Chaos will ensue — maybe even a civil war. But let's be honest. Isn't there an unspoken subtext or two at play here? The unspoken subtexts, I would suggest (again, with help from Bob Herbert), are:

1. We can't leave Iraq — as long as the war can continue to be fought by other people's children, and
2. We can't leave Iraq — as long as we can continue to put this colossally ill-conceived war on a credit card.

In other words, hypothetically at least, do these two things:

1. Re-instate the draft and start sending the wealthy Ivy Leaguers, the sons and daughters of the corporate CEOs, and the members of congress to fight and die in Iraq, and
2. start raising taxes — not just a little, but significantly! — to pay off the hundreds of billions of dollars, indeed, upwards to three trillion dollars! — that the war is actually costing us, and, friends, watch to see just how quickly this tragic war is brought to an end.

IV

And, so finally, I leave you where we started: What do you think the Amish would do if they were in charge of the War on Terror? And might it not look significantly better than what we currently see?

⁸ Herbert, Bob, "Consider the Living," *The New York Times*, May 29, 2006, p. A19.