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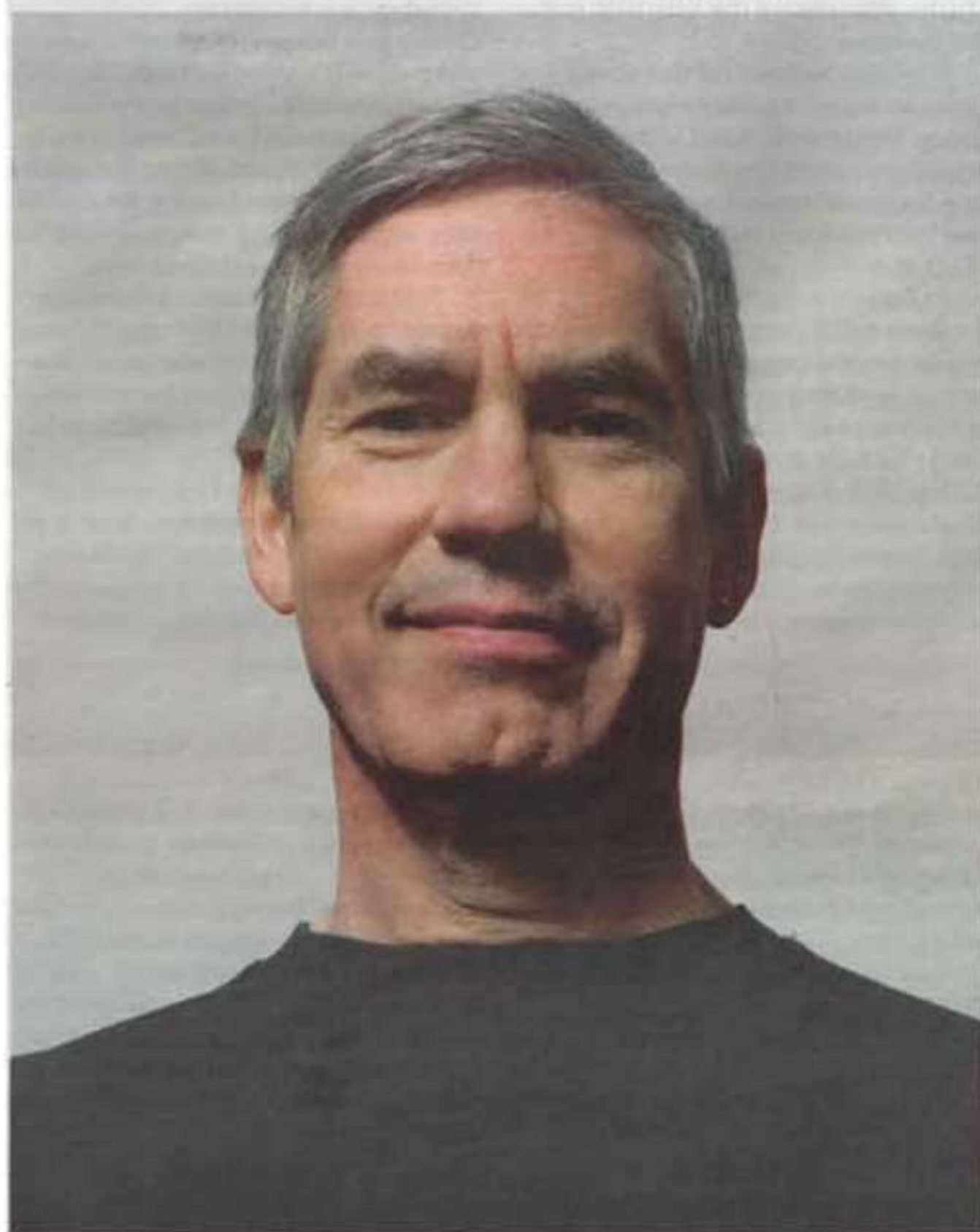
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REAL CHANGE

Along for the ride



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Exploring the fundamentalist movement as a family affair

By telling his family's history, local activist and writer Andrew Himes recounts the growth of evangelism in America

Interview by **TIMOTHY HARRIS**
Executive Director

Andrew Himes is a Seattle writer/activist whose resume is as varied as it is long. Labor activist and revolutionary communist. Microsoft executive. Advanceman for the Dalai Lama. Poet. Documentary filmmaker. Founder of Voices in Wartime, a Seattle nonprofit that promotes understanding and works to heal the effects of combat trauma. His recent book "The Sword of the Lord: The Roots of Fundamentalism in an American Family" traces his ancestors' history as Scotch-Irish immigrants in the early 19th century through to his grandfather's seminal role in the creation of the modern evangelical movement. Himes' history, including his own struggles to reconcile his childhood ideals of Christianity as he came of age during the Civil Rights Movement, is the story of God and politics in America. Andrew Himes will give a talk on "Sword of the Lord" on Sun., Feb. 6, at 7 p.m., at Trinity United Methodist Church in Ballard. More information may be found at theswordofthelord.com.

Tell me about your grandfather. Why was he important?

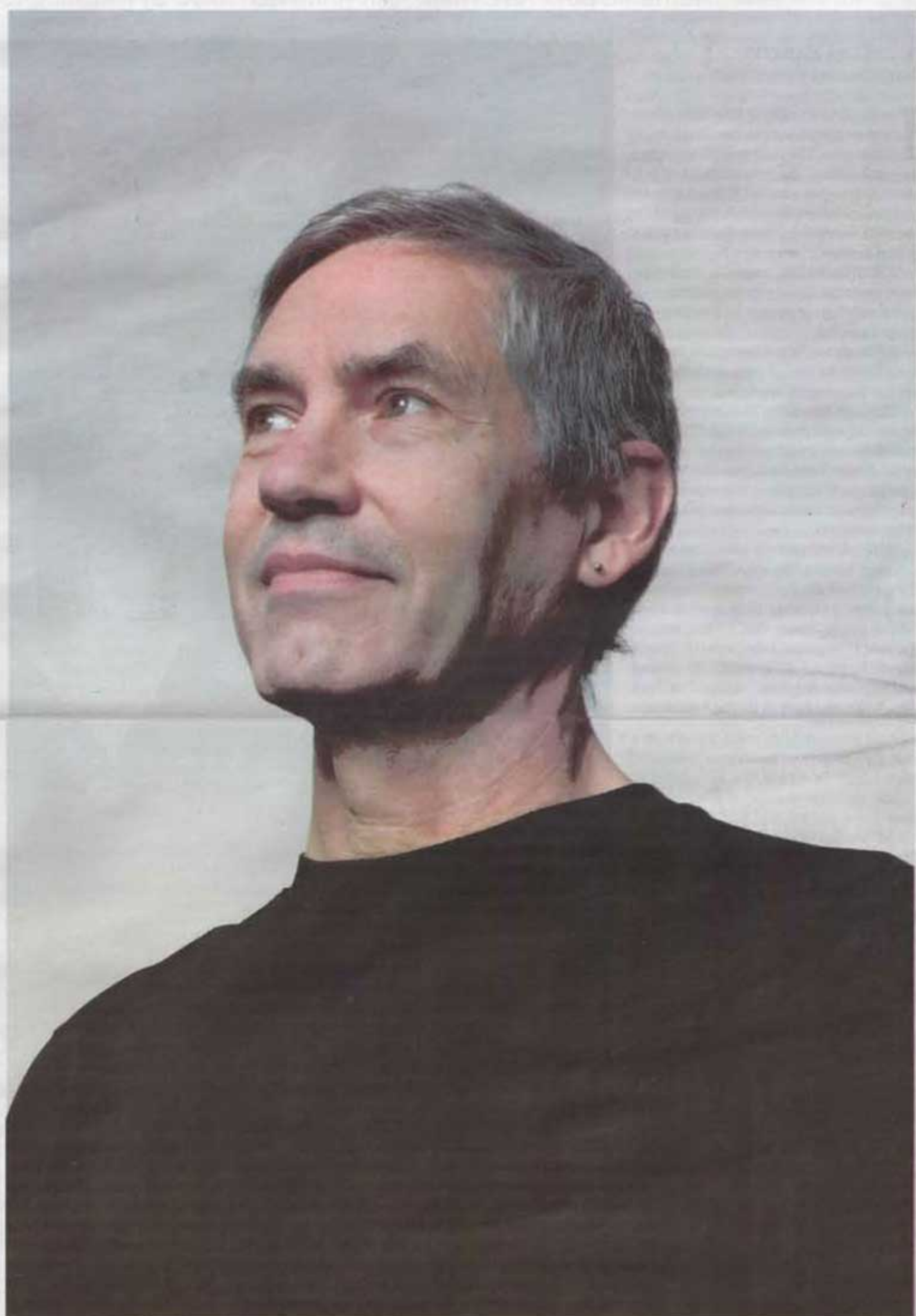
For several decades during the midsection of the 20th century, John R. Rice was one of the most influential fundamentalist Christian leaders in America. He started a newspaper in 1934 called *The Sword of the Lord* that, by the late 50s, was being sent out to a couple hundred thousand evangelical and fundamentalist leaders, including pastors of churches, missionaries, Sunday school superintendents and evangelists. He personally mentored, encouraged and taught an entire generation of younger evangelical and fundamentalist leaders, including Jerry Falwell, Billy Graham, and Bob Jones, Jr. He represented a strong strain in American fundamentalist politics and philosophy that, in my view, today dominates how we are seen as Americans and how we act in the world.

What did he mean to you?

He was someone whom I dearly loved and admired more than anybody in the world. I heard him preach a thousand sermons when I was growing up, from the time I was a tiny baby until I left home at the age of 18. So he had an enormous impact on who I am today. I was the oldest male grandchild in my family out of 28 grandchildren, and I grew up in this family in which every male adult was a Baptist preacher going back several generations. I was expected to walk into that legacy and join the line of preachers.

Your book is as much about the Southern experience and race as it is about fundamentalism. Sorting that out for yourself couldn't have been easy.

Well, I was born in the North and I had some of the sensibilities of a Northerner, but then I lived for years in the South and in a Southern family. For me, there were two events in 1963 that made a big difference: When a black man attempted to integrate my father's church and half the church members walked out the door



Moving from the North to the South as a child, Andrew Himes got to experience his family's evangelical leanings firsthand. He interwove those experiences into his book "The Sword of the Lord," part memoir, part religious history. Photo by Joshua Huston

rather than sit in the same building with a black man on a Sunday morning; and when two black children integrated my school and were met with an angry mob of white kids in the hallway outside of my eighth grade English class. Those were shocks to me and shoved me in the direction of questioning my faith and my politics, and my religion and my family, and everything that my granddad had taught.

In high school I was attending civil rights demonstrations and demonstrations against the war in Vietnam, in opposition to my family and everything I believed they stood for. I grew up extremely angry, hating everything about my family and my history and our tradition, and believing that it was truly evil.

One of the ongoing tensions within fundamentalism that you describe is the

degree to which politics is relevant to religious faith.

Well, it's actually something that characterizes both Left and Right. From the point of view of the Religious Right it's, "The world is changing around me. Moving into the 21st century, our values are dissolving. All of the things that I care about most deeply are being destroyed, and so I feel deeply threatened by consumerism, the commoditization of

life and the dissolution of community ties and family ties. I react against that by wanting to defend myself." That's a narrative that arises directly from the fundamentalist tradition.

And on the other hand the Left responds by thinking, "Those theocratic bastards. Those reactionary fundamentalist jerks. They're trying to shove their values down my throat, and by God I'm not gonna let that happen." So, what we have is a battle between people from that faith tradition and this faith tradition over who gets to own government in America. But what gets left behind is the way in which the spiritual connection and the faith that you have illuminates the life that you lead, and how you treat people and how you deal with them.

What would you say to somebody who is concerned about the threat of America transforming into a theocratic state? I think that's what animates the fear of the fundamentalist movement that many progressives have.

I would say that it's a fear that's at least six or seven years out of date, because theocracy in America hit its high-water mark in 2004 when George Bush was elected for the second time to the presidency. That was the last time in American history when the Religious Right had a decisive impact on a national election. We are now past the age of Christendom, in which Christianity could enjoy cultural hegemony and governmental endorsement. That, I think, is a very healthy development for Christianity.

And it's significant, I think, that in this past fall's election, the Religious Right, as the Religious Right, had no prominent role in the outcome of the election. Tea Party activists did, and doubtless many of those were conservative evangelicals, but they came onto the political stage not as theocrats but as rightwing populists.

The trend is toward the dissolution of faith, the dissolution of spiritual communities, the dissolution of religious identity. And so, for example, within the last 20 years or so, the number of people in polls who say, "I'm someone who doesn't prefer any particular religion," has gone from about 5 percent in the early 90s to about 15 percent or 16 percent today, right?

And while the absolute number of evangelicals has slightly gone up, the percentage of evangelicals in the population has gone down. And younger evangelicals are more interested in following Jesus, seeking justice, and loving their neighbors than in fighting the culture wars.

One of the ongoing tensions within fundamentalism is between separatism and the more ecumenical approach to evangelicalism that Billy Graham, for example, represented. This is a book about reaching out across the faith divide, but how do you reach out to those who cut themselves off from anyone unlike themselves?

All of the factors that made separatism supportable in earlier generations are breaking down in 21st century America. It is far more likely today, for example, for a Presbyterian to marry a Jew, or a Catholic to marry a secular humanist, or an atheist to marry a committed conservative evangelical, or a Buddhist to marry whoever. But only 30 years ago in America that was almost unheard of. The number of people who had interfaith marriages was extremely tiny and it was very controversial for a Catholic to marry a Jew, or even for a Baptist to marry an Episcopalian. In my family it would've been unheard of. So, demographics alone are undermining separatism.

But at the same time, we see things like Conservapedia, where you can look up information within this insular universe and not have to be confronted by anything that threatens your faith.

Yeah, so there's a real contradiction. On the Internet it's possible to constrain yourself to a very rigidly defined community of people who agree with you, and to not notice anything outside of that group.

And there are communities where, from what I understand, you've basically got a directory of who the evangelical Christian car mechanics and grocers are in your neighborhood. Frequent those stores and you never have to talk to an infidel.

But the contradiction is that while that's true, the very heart of the way in which fundamentalists were able in the past to simply wall themselves off from the rest of the world and to maintain that separatism is being undercut by the avalanche of diversity and pluralism that constitutes cultural life in the world today. And this is as true in Afghanistan with the Taliban as it is in the United States and with conservative evangelicals here.

Well, that's exactly their fear, isn't it?

It is, yeah. And it's a very real fear; it's a justified fear. And there are two sides of that fear: One is relatively positive and the other is relatively negative. From their point of view what's relatively negative is that what bombards them is an avalanche of culture and content — pornography and obscenity and immorality of all kinds — that intrudes on their family and in their household. It's a culture of global capitalism that has no values of its own, but simply reflects whatever the dollar is able to chase, and that's not a happy experience for lots of people around the world.

And then what's positive about it is that you also get introduced to cultures and people all over the world who have very different ideas and different backgrounds, and you notice that you live in an interdependent world and that your life isn't just in a little closet somewhere, but you're part of a global culture. That's an important thing to understand because the salvation of the world depends on it.

Over the decades, your own family's fundamentalism has become more open and accepting and less rigid. Is that a trend common to the fundamentalist movement?

It's certainly opened up some in the last 30 years. But many of the people today who actually call themselves fundamentalists are increasingly identified with a real rigidity in doctrine and in their theology. So for example, many fundamentalists in America today believe that the King James Version of the Bible is the only inspired translation, and that any of the thousand other translations available in print represents heresy. My family is not there, and for the most part they don't call themselves fundamentalists and they're not "King James Only" people, though they continue to believe in the orthodox doctrines of a conservative religion.

My guess is that evangelical Christians generally are less likely to be rigid and dogmatic about cultural values, about habits; they're more likely to go to a movie once in a

while. The women in my family, most of them now cut their hair — which they didn't when I was growing up — or they'll wear pants, which they didn't when I was growing up because they thought that was appropriate for men but not women.

You had a part in "Black Nativity" last season where you were the only white guy in the choir and soloed on "This Little Light of Mine." That must feel kind of like coming full circle.

Yeah, that is true. There's something about the black gospel tradition that feels like my fundamentalist childhood. The language that they use to talk about the Bible and God and Jesus and so on is very similar. On the other hand, the black gospel experience has been also strongly connected with the social gospel that Martin Luther King, Jr. espoused. It's about liberation, and caring for the poor, and seeking justice, and eliminating homelessness, and looking for ways in which the kingdom of God can be realized in our lives and on this earth.

So, I found myself in the "Black Nativity" choir singing songs that felt very familiar to me because I sang them when I was a child, and on the other hand singing them with all of the exuberance and rhythm and the sense of joy and this profound celebration of human life and human possibility that has been historically true of black gospel music. I felt extraordinarily blessed and privileged to be a part of that African-American choir. I'm really grateful for that experience.

We've talked about how when you sing your solo on "This Little Light of Mine," that you're not singing it "black." You're singing it as you did when you grew up with it.

From the point of view of "Black Nativity" and the people in the choir, they're also celebrating the contributions of evangelical Christians to their tradition, and the black tradition is also an evangelical Christian tradition. "Black Nativity" celebrates the

black cultural and spiritual experience; it celebrates liberation from earthly bonds for black people as well as racial reconciliation.

The original word in the ancient

Greek language from which evangelical was taken was the word *evangelion*, which meant "a bearer of good news." So, an evangelical ought to be someone who bears good news, and good news ought to be not the bad news that you're going to hell and I need to help you get saved so that you won't suffer the flames of the lake of fire forever, but rather—

Yeah, that really is bad news. [Laughs.]

That's not good news, man. "You're going to hell. Can I help you with that?" So, good news is like, "Let me celebrate with you. What is it that pulls us together as human beings? What is it that gives you joy? What can we do to repair the world? How do we find God? Let me share that with you." And so the struggle for justice, the struggle to serve the poor, the struggle to create the beloved community, the struggle to change our society so that it doesn't bear the burden of war and of poverty and of homelessness and of suffering, that's something to celebrate. So I claim that as evangelical heritage. That's something important. ■

The way in which fundamentalists were able to wall themselves off is being undercut by the avalanche of diversity in the world today.



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