

THE ORWELL PRIZE 2008

LONGLISTED ENTRY: JUSTIN WEBB, BBC RADIO 4 From Our Own Correspondent

FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT
JUSTIN WEBB
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Churches in the United States are expecting bumper congregations in the days ahead. Not for them the decision -- taken at some British churches -- to bring midnight mass forward to eight pm so there's less trouble from drunks!

America is still an overwhelming Christian country and with an election next year, religion's firmly on the political agenda with one presidential hopeful a preacher, another proudly Mormon and most of the rest openly touting their religious fervour.

And yet the nature of American religion seems to be undergoing a profound change, as Justin Webb's been finding out in the mid-western state of Kansas:

[GOTO AUDIO
NAME: JUSTIN WEBB
NUMBER: 51018
IN WORDS: There's an American
OUT WORDS: be bashing them
DURATION:5'00"]

There's an American expression for something that's utterly obvious but not, for some reason, noticed. *Hiding in plain sight*, the Americans call it: and the expression came to my mind as I sat in Kansas City airport, waiting for an ice storm to pass. Hiding in plain sight in this state is a revolution in American Christendom -- a change of heart that could see American protestant churches looking increasingly like their European equivalents.

The state of Kansas gets a bad press. It is huge and empty and mostly flat. In the summer it is uncomfortably hot and prone to tornados. In the winter it can be bitterly cold. Its big cities are not very big and rather grey. It is not in the culinary avant garde. In the airport café they have introduced nutritional advice next to their meals -- the fresh strawberries are described as containing no trans-fats, which is a relief I suppose, but only in Kansas could it be a surprise.

Kansas has also long been home to religious revivals and eccentric preachers, a few of them deeply wacky to put it mildly. Creationists, for instance, keep up a constant low-level guerrilla war in this state, and if that is insufficiently odd for you try going to Topeka to see the Reverend Fred Phelps and his flock at the Westboro Baptist Church -- who entertain themselves by turning up at public events with placards saying:

"God hates Gays"

Their campaign against homosexuals came to national prominence when they protested (and this really did happen) at the funerals of soldiers who had been killed in Iraq. The sexual orientation of the individual soldiers was not the issue. According to the church all Americans who die there are part of a punishment God is visiting on the United States because of His profound dislike of homosexuality in this country.

The point is that Pastor Phelps and his followers are not much liked by anyone inside or outside Kansas. The “burning at the stake” wing of America’s Christian churches, the wing that stresses vengeance over love, is in trouble.

The gentle nativity scene crowd are the ones on the up. Mr Phelps still grabs horrified attention from foreigners and Americans alike but most religious Kansans (and that means most Kansans) are becoming steadily less aggressive, not less religious, but less intolerant.

Opinion polls suggest that younger evangelical Christians are falling out of love with the Big Causes their churches have championed in recent years: in particular with opposing abortion and supporting the Iraq war.

This change is nowhere clearer than in Wichita in southern Kansas. The Reverend Terry Fox is a man you would have considered until recently to be a typical Wichita preacher: a fire and brimstone merchant. His sermon, delivered in staccato bursts, with heavy breathing for effect, concentrates on sin, in particular the sin of murdering babies in the womb.

“I am proud to be called the religious right” he blasts.

“I AM religious and I AM right!”

On the day I met him there was “good news” – hundreds of thousands of foreigners had just been converted to Christianity – including many mooslems!

You would expect the Rev Fox, in god fearing Kansas, to be preaching in a mega-church, an establishment big enough to cope with the crowds. And until recently he was: the Immanuel Baptist church near the centre of town was his. Easily spotted because of the huge tubular white cross, a hundred feet high and heated from the inside so that it doesn’t freeze and topple over.

But the Rev Fox’s cross is all that is left of his ministry at the old place. He tells me it was time to move on, but most locals think he was thrown out – thrown out for being too dogmatic, too extreme, even in Wichita.

To see Mr Fox in action I had to go to the Best Western Hotel out among the tattier motels and gas stations on the far outskirts of town. They clear a central atrium for him, they turn down the muzac, they put away the tinselly plastic Christmas trees, and several hundred turn up for a cheerful haranguing: Mr Fox is not about to be run out of town, but he is metaphorically as well as literally, on the outskirts now. His hatred of abortion, his contempt for gay rights, his support for the Iraq war; all of these things have led him to his current predicament.

At his old church, the new pastor tells me sniffily he has never had the pleasure of meeting Mr Fox; the concerns of HIS ministry are he said, human rights, and the environment.

Golly, this is a big change. I’ve come to town to speak to these people about whether they still support the Republican party but that’s a minor issue, it seems to me, compared with the much bigger question of HOW they still support God.

Hidden in plain sight this Christmas, is the softening of Evangelical America. A million Kansan will be taking their Bibles to church in the coming week – but they will not be bashing them.