

I am so sick of the way born-again Christians are portrayed in the media. What's wrong with people? Do they think all born-agains are narrow-minded, Bible-waving bigots?

Is the desire for sensationalism so strong that the media have to make every born-again a Bible-waving fanatic who chains herself to abortion-clinic doors and supports the madmen who shoot the doctors that perform abortions? It is so unfair to focus on the extremist fringe and ignore all the normal people who are born-again Christians.

This movie is only one example of the way that born-again Christians are portrayed in the media. America's most popular image of a born-again Christian is a narrow-minded, Bible-waving bigot who doesn't know how to have fun.

Now, don't get me wrong; I'm not saying that we don't sometimes wave our Bibles around. There are people who call themselves born-again Christians who find it absolutely imperative that they shove their beliefs down everyone's throat, "waving their Bible" all the while. They chain themselves to abortion-clinic doors and support the madmen who shoot the doctors that perform abortions.

In this draft, as a peer reviewer suggested to Rachel, her anger, though arguably justified, was getting in the way of her analysis of how born-again Christians are portrayed in the media. The peer reviewer thought Rachel was calling too much attention to her own feelings ("I am so sick" and "It is so unfair") and blaming others ("What's wrong with these people?") when she should have been explaining the issue and its significance. The peer reviewer also mentioned that the rhetorical questions at the end of the opening paragraph and beginning of the second made her feel that Rachel was trying to strong-arm her readers instead of persuading them. Notice in the revised version how Rachel turns the sequence of questions into analytical statements that explore the issue at hand instead of assuming agreement on the reader's part. Rachel also enhances the reasonable tone of the commentary by making the rhetorical question in the second paragraph into a concession on her part that it's true some born-agains are extremists.

NOTES ON THE TEXT

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Writing 1
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Socially Acceptable Discrimination?

I looked up at the billboard as we drove home from church one Sunday and saw the advertisement for the newest Steve Martin movie, Leap of Faith. Martin stood in the center of the board, arms raised above him, his suitcoat gaudy and sparkling. His face was tilted upwards. A slight smile on his lips, his eyes were squinted. His stance suggested religious worship. Lights shone down from behind him, and the words Leap of Faith were pasted on the board over his head. At first glance, the picture looked sincere; here was a man worshipping God. However, when I noticed the overdone clothes and the pious look on his face, I knew that this was not a picture of a man praising his God. This was an advertisement for a movie whose sole purpose was to make a "hilarious" comedy out of the life of a television evangelist. Later, when I saw the preview trailers for Leap of Faith on television, I saw Steve Martin pushing fat, sweating women to the floor in a cheap imitation of what sometimes happens at real evangelical tent meetings. He had this look of intense pleasure on his face, his body language wide and over-the-top, almost as if he was getting a sexual kick out of what he was doing. The character was described as being "a born-again, Spirit-filled, holy-rollin' Christian," and often spouted "Well, Peraaaaise God!" This movie is only one example of the way that born-again Christians are portrayed in the media. America's most popular image of a born-again Christian is a narrow-minded, Bible-waving bigot who doesn't know how to have fun.

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who find it absolutely imperative that they shove their beliefs down everyone's throat, "waving their Bible" all the while. They chain themselves to abortion-clinic doors and support the madmen who shoot the doctors that perform abortions. There are people in every group, whether it is feminists, African Americans, those of Middle Eastern descent, or teenagers, who are the "black sheep," so to speak, of the group. They are the radicals and therefore are sensational. They get the publicity and portray their group as being as radical and unbalanced as they are. Not all African Americans harbour deep, hateful grudges against whites. Actually, a large majority of them don't. Often, in movies, they are portrayed in the stereotype that they all hate whites, as in Malcolm X. This portrayal is the most sensational, and therefore the most newsworthy. Why hasn't anyone made a major, widely released movie about the life of Martin Luther King Jr.? Because he didn't have a checkered past, his life wasn't filled with violence and anger (on his part, at least), and he preached a message of forgiveness. Those things aren't sensational. They aren't as newsworthy as the radical, insane things that the media prefer to focus on.

Because of the media's attraction to the sensational, often groups are represented erroneously. What's sensational about the rest of the born-again Christians? They don't attack doctors and plant explosives in office buildings. They don't all go around condemning everyone they meet to hell. They live just like everyone else. Granted, they don't frequent too many bars and brothels, they tend to spend more time in church than most Americans, and they live, very strictly, by the Bible. Because of this last point, many believe that Christians don't have any fun. That is one of the main reasons movies like Leap of Faith were made. The media say that underneath that "good" image, Christians are probably really warped human beings, following some long-dead cult that says the world will come to an end pretty soon, so all the rest of us had better join up or we'll be in lots of trouble. Leap of Faith just gives people a laugh and helps relieve them of the little suspicion that those crazy, born-again Christians just might have something. When a prominent televangelist is

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exposed, the media jump into the fray and triumphantly hold up the tattered pieces, flaunting the fall of someone supposed to be "good." This concentration on the negative side of Christianity lends itself to making the public see born-again Christians as completely unbalanced, non-rational, bigoted people. We are portrayed in only the worst ways.

My intent in writing on this subject is not to whine about injustice and the liberal media, but to bring out the other side of the issue. To put it plainly, every special interest group in America has gained a lot of publicity for fighting discrimination, except for the born-again Christians. Politically correct speech is the newest fad; everyone is careful about what they say. More movies are being released that center on the lives of homosexuals, there is a rise in the frequency of African American sitcoms, Greenpeace gets news coverage every time they try to sue a lumber company, and whenever there is a story on abortion, a majority of the personal interviews come from the pro-choice side. In all this "political correctness," born-again Christians are invariably left out by the media because the beliefs that we hold do not embrace all the personal preferences that people have. We live by a definite standard of right and wrong, and because people do not want to be told that something they are doing is wrong, they invent their own morality: situation ethics. Born-again Christians do not fit into that jelly-mold of American society. When a movie like Leap of Faith came out, the only protests against such discrimination were in Christian magazines and books. We fight the currents, and yes, we do make people uncomfortable sometimes, but why is discrimination against us more culturally acceptable?

Interview with Rachel Smith

Q: What prompted you to write "Socially Acceptable Discrimination"?

A: I have felt for a long time that people unfairly judge born-again Christians like myself. If you go by the newspapers, born-again are narrow-minded bigots,

madmen who kill abortion doctors, or hypocrites like Jim Bakker. I know this isn't the real story, but it seemed that these stereotypes of born-again Christians are just something I had to live with—that I couldn't really do anything about it. Then I saw the Steve Martin movie, *Leap of Faith*, and I began to think that this might give me an occasion to try to correct perceptions.

Q: How did you decide to focus on the particular issues you explore in "Socially Acceptable Discrimination"?

A: I knew I wanted to change the way people perceive born-again Christians but I also knew I couldn't just say, "Hey, you've got it all wrong. That's not the way we really are." I'd be asking people to accept my personal experience, and I was pretty sure this wasn't going to work. So I thought that if I focused on how the media portrayed born-again Christians, and tied this to the idea that the media love to sensationalize things, I might get a different response from readers. I figured most people think the media are sensationalistic and that by using this as a kind of common ground with readers, I could introduce my own point of view in a way that might get a hearing.

Q: What conflicts, if any, did you experience writing this commentary?

A: It's hard because movies like *Leap of Faith* and all the media coverage of crazed evangelicals really gets me angry. I know it's a false picture and totally unfair to me and other born-again Christians, who are just normal people who happen to believe in God and want to follow the Bible. I wanted to make this point, but I also knew that if I let my anger come out too strongly, I was going to lose readers—or maybe even confirm their impression that we're all nuts. So I definitely experienced this conflict of wanting to be loyal to other believers and to get their real story out and, at the same time, knowing that I had to write in a reasonable tone. That's where the Steve Martin movie and the idea of media sensationalism were so helpful to me. By analyzing them (instead of screaming at people, which is what I felt like doing), I think I got some critical distance and could still be true to what I wanted to say.



1. As Rachel Smith notes in the interview, her main purpose is to "correct perceptions" of born-again Christians. What was your attitude toward born-again Christians before you read "Socially Acceptable Discrimination"? Did reading her commentary confirm, modify,

change, or otherwise affect the attitude you began with? Given your experience reading the essay, what suggestions would you offer Smith to help achieve her purpose?

2. Smith says that she realized she couldn't persuade people solely on the basis of her personal experience as a born-again Christian. Instead, she focuses on how the media portray born-again Christians. Evaluate this strategy. To what extent does it offer the common ground with readers that she hopes to find? Are there ways she could strengthen this appeal?
3. Smith notes a conflict between her loyalty to other believers and her desire to reach out to her readers. One way this conflict manifests itself is in the tension between the anger she feels about being portrayed unfairly and the need she acknowledges to maintain a reasonable tone in her writing. How well do you think she handles this tension? What suggestion would you offer about how to manage this conflict?

REFLECTING ON YOUR WRITING

Use the following questions from the interview with Rachel Smith to interview someone who has recently written a commentary. It could be a classmate, but also consider interviewing columnists of your student or local newspaper.

1. What prompted you to write the commentary?
2. How did you decide to establish the focus of the piece?
3. What conflicts, if any, did you experience when you wrote it?

Compare the writer's experience writing the commentary with your own.