

Persecution, Christian-style

Kris King – August 20th 2011

<http://www.rantinaminor.co.uk/2011/08/persecution-christian-style/>

You've probably never heard of the [West Memphis Three](#), but you should have. If, like me, you've often been made to feel like an outsider, or you grew up with the sense that you never quite fit in amongst those around you, then you need to hear their story. Perhaps you believe, as I do, that religion is an inherently divisive and destructive influence on the lives of ordinarily good and decent people; a virulent form of infection that has the capacity to poison everyone and everything it comes in to contact with (and has a proven track record for doing just that)? If so then you should learn all you can about the West Memphis Three because they, more than almost anyone else in the developed, supposedly civilised, world in recent memory can tell you exactly how it feels to be the victims of a religious witch-hunt. This is persecution, christian-style.

In May 1993, three young boys, Stevie Branch, Michael Moore, and Christopher Byers, were found murdered in the woods of Robin Hood Hills in West Memphis, Arkansas. Their bodies were discovered naked and hog-tied, and one (Byers) had mutilation to the genitals. Sexual assault was suspected, but disputed. Three teenagers were arrested, and later convicted for their murder; Damien Echols (18) was given the death penalty, while Jessie Misskelley Jr. (17) and Jason Baldwin (16) were sentenced to life imprisonment. While none of the three could be said to be perfect (they each had a misdemeanour or two to their names), there didn't seem to be much about them that pointed towards multiple murder. Except, because this was Arkansas, there was; the fact that Jason had a Metallica T-shirt, and Echols wore black, read [Aleister Crowley](#), and was called Damien, was considered more than sufficient to convict them.

The West Memphis 3, as they became known, were tried, convicted and, in Echols case, put on death row, a decision based *entirely* on what has been referred to as "satanic panic". *There was never any physical evidence against them whatsoever*, and the investigation itself was considered something of a cluster-fuck from day one; the police didn't call the coroner for hours, the bodies of the victims were moved from the water before examination, police records were a mess, physical evidence was stored in paper bags from a supermarket, and Echols' polygraph test examiner kept no written record of the test (despite claiming it indicated "deception"). Misskelley, who had an IQ of 72, was interrogated for 12 hours, *alone*, and with only *46 minutes* of the interview actually recorded – if that sounds like the police coerced and intimidated the Forrest Gump of the group in order to scare him sufficiently shitless into giving them a confession then that'll be because that's exactly what they did. Misskelley quickly recanted his confession.

Strangely it wasn't really that that had sealed the three's fate, although it did help considerably. What really hammered the final nail in was when the prosecution brought an "occult expert" (whose qualifications came from a diploma mill) to testify that the crime apparently bore "the hallmarks of a satanic ritual". When you're living in Bible Thump, USA, you need only mention the name of satan, or even just drop heavily implied references to the biblical mischief-maker, and everything becomes white noise. People won't hear you, no matter how many facts you present; logic cannot penetrate the wall of religious outrage that gets built up, and no reason can be allowed to sustain. When a town is faced with a deeply emotive issue like, say, having a couple of murdered kids on their hands, the police are under intense pressure to resolve it quickly and, when that town is awash with the devout and faithful, it's not conducive to a long and happy existence spent in blissful freedom to be the local weird kid.

It might sound like I'm simply jumping to the defence of fellow members of the black fingernails, long-haired, metal-loving fraternity, so I urge you to watch "[Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills](#)" and "[Paradise Lost 2: Revelations](#)", two documentaries that were made about the case by Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky. The film-makers had unprecedented access, and both movies feature interviews with everyone concerned right from the beginning (shortly after the arrests of the three teens). I will warn you, however, they're not light-hearted, easy-going, Saturday night fare; the first documentary, for example, opens with graphic footage of the crime scene and,

over the course of two-and-a-half hours, it will make you feel outraged and appalled in ways that not even the Daily Mail can comprehend. It's not just because of the horrific nature of the crime but also the fact that you can see the most awful miscarriage of justice unfolding right before your eyes.

You might feel that describing this case as being one of religious persecution is something of an exaggeration, but you should remember that there really was absolutely **no** physical evidence linking these three to the crime. All anyone had to go on was the way they looked, the clothes they wore, the books they read, and the music they listened to. When I first heard about this story in 1996 (shortly before "Paradise Lost" came out, although I didn't get to see it until some years later) it was like a punch in the gut. Here were three guys who were my age (actually I'm about a year older than Echols), shared my taste in music and clothes, and they were potentially going to be murdered by the state on the blatantly flimsy pretext that a community of devout christians believed them guilty of satanic, ritualistic murder on no evidence whatsoever. In my mind, the only fundamental difference between myself and these three was the town I grew up in.

Rightly or wrongly, it all felt rather *personal* to me. I never had a particularly good opinion of religion, and this case didn't help; I'd even go so far as to say that it constitutes one of the central pillars supporting my opinion that faith is, by its very nature, designed to divide people, rather than unite them. When it comes to worshipping a particular invisible man you are either "one of us" or you are "one of them"; it's straightforward, black and white, up and down, "you're either with us or against us" (where have we heard that before?), and god help you, literally god help you, if you're against us. Naturally the religious claim that they are, contrary to my assertion, a true force for unity – or, at least, they would be if everyone agreed with them and joined their club (they're very much "my way or the highway" in their approach – it explains their complete intractability on everything).

Once you have decided to build your world view around the logical fallacy of a false dichotomy you're left with the uncomfortable decision of what to do with all the people who disagree with you. Ideally they should be on your side because you're clearly right about everything (you know, all that god, origin of the universe, and absolute morality stuff), and there's no harm in having a few extra bums on pews and coins in the collection plates, is there? Sadly we don't live in an ideal world, so some of those "others" simply aren't interested, can't be persuaded, and won't be converted. Options are limited; ignoring them is out of the question because, well, "they're not *with* us so they're clearly *against* us", meaning that the only choice left is to wage war on them – oppress them, persecute them, subdue them, bully them, intimidate them, marginalise them, whatever it takes ... believe, or die.

Religious persecution is as old as religion itself (actually, they're twins, and religion was born first by around 12 minutes), and has been responsible for an incalculable quantity of suffering throughout the course of human history. From the obvious and huge things like the Crusades or the Spanish Inquisition (which, apparently, nobody expects), to the less obvious and small things like christian protesters' intimidation of vulnerable women outside abortion clinics, religious zealots have, for several millennia, considered themselves the envoys of truth, the arbiters of morality, and the defenders of all that is good and righteous; just because they believe a shouty man in the sky has, through the medium of a fantasy novel written by poorly-educated, bronze-age goat molesters, been telling them how to live their lives for the last few thousand years they feel that somehow gives them the right to tell the rest of us what to do.

In its time religion has been inordinately successful, and amazingly efficient, in carrying out its deeply-solemn mission to pick on pretty much everyone it doesn't like. If, as a believer, there's anyone smaller than you, more vulnerable than you, or just plain disagrees with your beliefs, the chances are that you, or your faith, have oppressed them in some way (often violently, even fatally). Religion persecutes women (more on which in next week's post but, as Christopher Hitchens put it, "that's half the planet right there"), people of colour, the unmarried, members of other faiths, teachers, foreigners, non-believers, scientists, and gays (whom it wrongly describes as "unnatural" – custom-built mega-churches and the printing press are unnatural – sharks, botulinum toxin, human excrement, and death, on the other hand, are all 100% naturally-occurring phenomena, hand-made by the lord godling Jebus H. Crispy Bacon himself).

How have they been able to get away with it for so long? Simple: they've got all the money and power, and they've used it to insulate themselves against attack, or even criticism. How many times do you hear the religious bleating about how their rights are being taken away? How often do you hear them claiming that they're being victimised and oppressed? Can you believe the sheer front of these hypocritical bastards? I don't give a fuck who you are, but when you've got the lion's share of

all the wealth and influence in this world, and you spend and exercise it trying to rob other people of their basic human rights, you don't get to claim victim status (and especially not when someone's telling you to stop being a bullying wanker). For too long now religion has abused the weak while simultaneously positioning itself beyond receiving any sort of criticism for it. "How dare you tell me I can't bully brown people! Their very existence is against my beliefs, and you're taking away my freedom of religion! Help! Help! I'm being repressed!"

In the western developed nations (although I'm thinking largely of the United States) things have had to change over the last few hundred years or so. By the time the age of enlightenment was in full swing in the 18th century it was no longer really possible to nail someone to a tree claiming they had the devil in them and expect that you'd be able to get away with it (although in the American south in the 1960s it was possible to hang blacks from trees with absolute righteousness and get away with it, but that was more to do with KKK-infested police forces turning a blind eye). Ever since that time religious persecution has had to get much more subtle and insidious, especially during the latter half of the 20th century and into the 21st as religions became a fiercely potent force in modern politics (particularly in America).

By allying themselves with certain parties, political doctrines, or even individual candidates, religions could mobilise the huge support of their congregation in order to achieve the changes they wanted to see. They could, through their support and donations, get laws modified in their favour; preachers have, over the last 30 or so years, have been able to get their flock to vote for a candidate beneficial to their faith organisation by convincing them that they were, not just a person of god, but actually *god's choice*. Conversely, candidates with great ambitions of going far, maybe even all the way to the top, would frequently associate themselves very openly with the man upstairs and his self-styled representatives down here. The Republicans are absolute masters at this, with barely a single candidate in decades who didn't have his or her tongue lodged deeply in the arsehole of the religious right.

So, since the 1950s we've witnessed the ever-increasing pace of the stampede of religious moralism in which anything they didn't like was branded demonic, satanic, anti-christian or, in a desperate attempt to conflate faith and flag, anti-American. The idea that "them communists are all atheists!" (when they weren't) pushed church and state ever closer with the introduction of "In God We Trust" on money and "One Nation Under God" in the pledge, and marked the real dawn of the oft-repeated lie that America "is a christian nation". Now that the ball of religious influence on politics was rolling the destruction of freedom of thought and expression could follow right behind it. Books, music, movies, television, any area of life or culture that didn't specifically relate to the church, anything that wasn't about neutering one's intellectual curiosity and instead praising the unholy nothingness in their deluded minds, was in the firing line.

Don't like a book? Call it obscene and anti-god or, better still, get it banned, jail the author, and bankrupt the publisher. Don't like rock and roll music? Say it's satanic and destroying the nation's children, protest the concerts, run the band out of town, and intimidate promoters so they'll be too afraid to ever book the band again. And what of the kids who like this stuff? Well, they're clearly smitten with the devil – Satan has obviously got a choke-hold on them and there's no hope of salvation. Unless, of course, they can be made to like christian rock, without doubt the lamest, most cynical cultural hypocrisy ever committed by the church – fortunately, only the poor sods who already believed in god fell for that shit (the same goes for christian metal and, holy suffering fuck, christian *rap* – if you don't believe how bad it can get, check out the infamous "[Christian Side Hug](#)"; apparently believers can't enjoy a simple, innocent embrace without getting a stiffy – perverts).

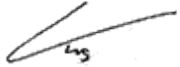
And so we return to the West Memphis Three; the local "weird kids" who read the books, wore the clothes, and listened to the music that religion didn't like, and religion persecuted them right into prison for 18 years for it. For nearly two decades Damien Echols faced the very real possibility that each year could be his last, with the constant threat of a lethal injection looming over him, and he did so with the full knowledge that it was satanic panic, religious hysteria and intolerance that put him in that position. There's a good reason that, contrary to the claims of apologists, the legal systems of most nations are *not* built around religious doctrine, nor their laws based on holy scripture. They, like our religious commandments, are based on the morality we derive from our being an interdependent social species. To base our law on a doctrine of faith would be to live in a theocracy – a government of, by, and for a religion and its followers, where persecution and injustice would become endemic.

For now, though, this story does at least have a happy ending. Yesterday, as a result of a rather

complex, and obscure, form of legal plea, [the WM3 were released as free men](#) after 18 long years in jail. With DNA evidence that was never available at the time of the original trial the three were facing a probable re-trial in December anyway, so this deal smacks of a legal system trying desperately to avoid the possibility that their incompetence, and their persecution of these three men in lieu of any evidence against them, would result in an acquittal that could put varying congressional or senatorial ambitions in jeopardy. Prosecutor Scott Ellington's comment that it would have been, "practically impossible to put on a proper case against [the] defendants" is the closest you're going to get to an admission that they had absolutely fucking *nothing* on these guys.

All that remains now is for the three to enjoy their freedom, live their lives, and do what they can to clear their names once and for all. To show that religious persecution can not only be overcome, but that it should never have to be tolerated in the first place ...

Welcome home guys ...

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be a stylized 'V' or 'W' followed by a horizontal line.