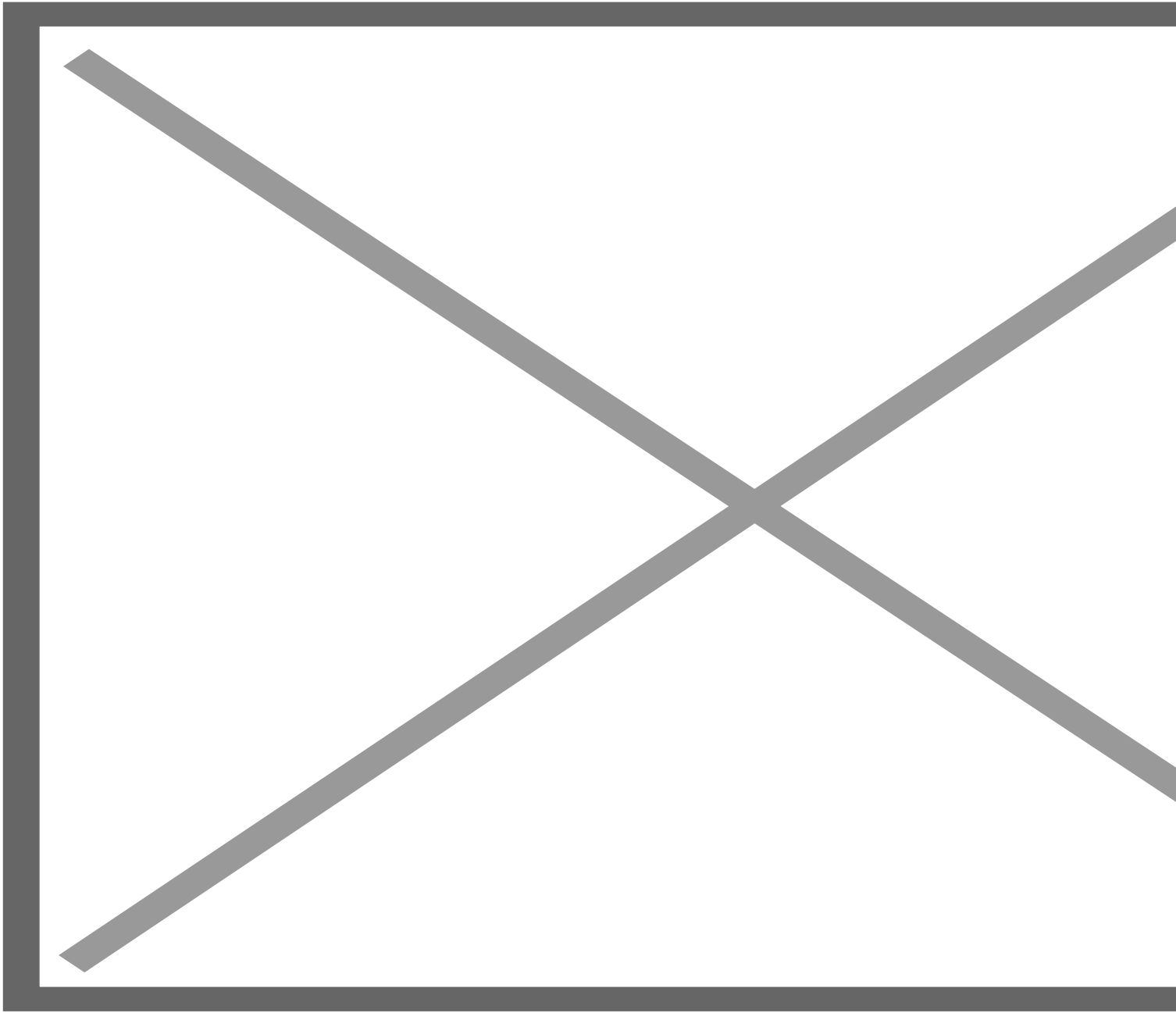


When theology kills

Ruth Miller's beliefs led to multiple deaths. Is my own faith giving life or taking it?

by [Brandon Ambrosino](#)

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Century illustration

In August, an Amish woman threw her child into an Ohio lake to give him to the Lord. While the timeline is difficult to piece together—the ordeal seems to have unfolded throughout the night—it appears that the events were initiated when Ruth Miller and her husband believed God told them to perform certain tasks off a dock to prove their “worthiness.” Disappointed in his own performance, the husband decided to swim a great distance alone. His body, along with that of their four-year-old, was found dead in the lake.

Sheriff Orville Campbell, during a news briefing on the shocking events, tried to walk a line between communicating that Ruth Miller was suffering from mental health issues (which he called “spiritual delusion”) and affirming that she seemed “genuinely sincere” in her beliefs that God was testing her. At some point, Miller told authorities, she believed God sent a fish to swallow her husband. “None of it was making a lot of sense,” said Campbell.

In the body cam footage of Miller’s arrest, she is compliant and soft-spoken, calmly recommending to authorities that they send their “best” scuba divers into the lake to find her husband and child. “This is a miracle from God. You’ll see.” She put her hand on an officer’s shoulder, as if encouraging someone struggling with belief: “He is real and he loves you.”

Miller’s statements made me uncomfortable, and not only because they defend alleged murder (she was [indicted](#) on seven counts and pled not guilty by reason of insanity on September 8). They are eerily reminiscent of things I hear Christians say on a regular basis.

Miller believed God was testing her faith, that God demanded sacrifices, and that God would defy the laws of nature to reward great faith. She also believed that God could keep humans alive in the belly of a big fish.

Yep, yep, yep, and yep.

Of course, most Christians who hold these beliefs would condemn a parent for being willing to sacrifice their child. Unless they are talking about Abraham.

“What about the guy in the Bible who God told to kill his son on that mountain?” one of my students asked when we discussed this news story. “This Amish woman sounds a lot like him.”

Another student objected: “Yeah, but God stopped Abraham before he could kill Isaac.”

Both students had a point. The outcomes of the stories are completely different: No child is killed in Genesis 22. But both Abraham and the Amish woman believe God might require us to risk bodily harm to ourselves or our children. Both believe God speaks to them. Both believe God tests them. We might want to create a gulf between the two stories, but the beliefs check many of the same theological boxes.

Plenty of adept commentators, including, famously, Kierkegaard, have written insightful essays on the *akedah*, or the binding of Isaac. I don’t have much more to contribute to those conversations. Instead, I’m interested in the question my student asked about the similarity between Abraham and Miller. Behind that question lurks another, very urgent one that requires an answer: Why does so much Christian theology end in death?

I used to believe the most important task for the theologian was to be right. Now, I’m not so sure. Of course, God has revealed himself, and a large chunk of the theologian’s vocation consists in making sure our God-talk is fitting to that self-revelation. But theology, unlike other academic disciplines, is not interested primarily in service to truth but fidelity to a person—a person who has, we believe, *truthfully* revealed that the most important thing about him is that he is madly in love with the world. In order to make good on that revelation,

we need to cooperate with his love. That is the most authentic apologetic in a world that has forgotten its loveableness.

Can we get God right? The doctrine of revelation teaches us that we can't, on our own, get God anything. God has gotten *us*, and part of this getting includes showing us that we've been got. How else were we to find out?

I am convinced we can get God wrong, though. Miller, sadly, did. Perhaps Abraham did, too. God is a god of life, a god of the living, a god who sustains us at each moment with God's own breath and God's own laughter. Any theological conclusion or suggestion that convinces us to disvalue life, ours or another's, does not proceed from a belief in the biblical God of life.

I suppose what I'm saying is that the scriptures that reflect on God's dealings with the world do not exist to be "right," but to encourage and challenge us to speak honestly about our dealings with God and each other. Our task is to make sure our theological claims are worthy of God's generous, extravagant love. Unfortunately, not every Bible verse, alone on the page, is worthy of that love. That doesn't mean we shouldn't read those verses. It means that when we invite these words into our theological musing, we need to be vigilant, aware of the awful fact that at times, the words we're reading lead people away from life. If we aren't careful, then we might one day find ourselves believing that God is testing us by asking us to kill people we love.

It would be anti-Jewish to talk about Jesus breaking the Sabbath as if he were somehow starting some movement predicated on abolishing the law. There is, however, truth in the claim that he critically interrogated Sabbath theology as he worked to honor both God and God's cause in the world. In this, however, Jesus was not outside of Judaism but squarely inside the debates that were happening around him. His views are in line with other Pharisaical views, which tended to be more progressive than those of other Jewish groups (like the Essenes). If and when the gospels show Jesus arguing with Pharisees, it isn't because he thinks they're being legalistic but because they're inconsistent. They already believed you could pull an animal out of a pit on the Sabbath; why not heal somebody?

Although it dates to a few centuries after Jesus, the Mishnah gives us some evidence that the Sabbath debate was, as one of my former professors put it, in the air at the time the gospels emerged. Here's an example:

"With regard to one who suffers pain in his throat, one may place medicine inside his mouth on Shabbat, although administering a remedy is prohibited on Shabbat. This is because there is uncertainty whether or not it is a life-threatening situation for him, as it is difficult to ascertain the severity of internal pain. *And a case of uncertainty concerning a life-threatening situation overrides Shabbat*" ([Yoma 8:6](#)).

Later [Talmudic commentary](#) grounds this leniency in Leviticus 18:5: "You shall keep my statutes and ordinances, which a person shall do and live by them." In other words, God's commandments are meant for life—not death.

We must keep life at the forefront of our minds when interpreting scripture and doing theology. God is a god of life, which is why it's so troubling to hear Christians talk in ways that disvalue life. It's an embarrassing part of our inherited tradition, but Christianity has blood on its hands. From colonial conquest and religious wars to the mistreatment of LGBTQ people and full-throated defenses of chattel slavery, Christianity has often positioned itself against life, and, ironically, against the God who creates, sustains, and defends life.

The political crisis of the last few years has caused many of us to reflect on the trajectories of Christianity itself. How could a faith based on the life and ministry of Jesus ever lead to movements of nationalism, warmongering,

and worship of the state? What is it about our faith that millions of our fellow American Christians can embrace it while simultaneously believing that the same faith sits comfortably alongside narcissism, egotism, and plain old meanness?

The answer has to do with our theology. Popular American theology places a premium on sacrifice, violence, power, punishment, and conformity. No wonder that version of Christianity has no difficulty allying itself with politics organized around the same themes.

There are theologies that lead to life, and there are theologies that lead to death. Our Christian tradition contains both. Our Christian future doesn't have to.