

HBO'S "FRIENDS OF GOD" PRESENTS EVANGELICALS AS A CARNIVAL ATTRACTION By Don Feder

Watching Alexandra Pelosi's documentary "Friends of God," showing on HBO all this month, brings to mind the carnival attractions of a bygone era.

Instead of "See the bearded lady and Jo-Jo the dog-faced boy," it's – "See the Christian wrestlers and the Goth Christian teens, with their nose rings and fuchsia-colored hair, talking about getting a religious 'high.'"

Pelosi takes a diverse and dynamic community (estimated at 50 million to 80 million) and turns it into a "Ripley's Believe It Or Not!" cavalcade of the bizarre.

Blue-Staters often picture evangelicals as a tribe of shallow, and slightly loony fanatics. Pelosi's documentary reinforces these prejudices.

With minimal effort, the daughter of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi could have found a few evangelical scientists, stock brokers, dedicated inner-city teachers or counselors at drug rehab centers.

Instead, she offers HBO viewers the Christian Wrestling Federation, Christian miniature golf (where players putt through the empty tomb of the resurrected Jesus) a truck-stop prayer group and a Bible theme park, where an actor in robe and sandals dispenses parables.

At a drive-through *church*, those seeking the spiritual equivalent of fast-food can pray with a lady behind a glass window, from the convenience of their car.

It's the tried-and-true technique of filmmakers with an agenda – find the most embarrassing and absurd examples of whatever you want to lampoon and get it on camera.

Pelosi's piece is like a Bush-supporter making a documentary on the anti-war movement by going to rallies and interviewing geriatric Trotskyites, dudes in dirty dreadlocks carrying signs equating Israel to the Third Reich and Trans-gendered Scientologists to Bring Back The Taliban.

One "Friends of God" segment shows Creationism being taught to 6-year-olds. Naturally, this entailed explanations six-year-olds can comprehend. Still, it leaves viewers with the impression that the best case that can be made against Darwinism is a picture of a dinosaur ("behemoth" of the Bible, we're told) pulling a caveman's cart.

A review in The Denver Post notes: "With smug narration and a condescending tone, the filmmaker ... finds plenty to gawk at outside her hip metropolitan comfort zone. Nobody sounds more provincial than a New Yorker set adrift in the heartland."

Pelosi follows the trail blazed by Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady's 2006 documentary "Jesus Camp," about a Pentecostal summer camp for seven-to-12-year olds in North Dakota.

With thousands of Bible camps across the land to choose from, Ewing and Grady found the most extreme and scary.

Ministry Today observes, "Evangelicals and Pentecostals will leave the movie feeling angry, embarrassed or both."

In “Jesus Camp,” kids pray with a card-board cut-out of George Bush. Campers weep uncontrollably as they are told they’re “hypocrites” and “phonies” -- in a segment reminiscent of a Cultural Revolution self-criticism session.

Becky Fischer, founder of the “Kids on Fire” summer camp, comes across as a Pentecostal version of Mullah Omar. “I want to see young people who are as committed to the cause of Jesus Christ as the young people are to the cause of Islam,” Fischer confides. “I want to see them radically laying (*down*) their lives for the Gospel, as they are over in Pakistan and Israel and Palestine.”

As reviewers noted, all that was missing here were the AK-47s and dynamite belts (giving a new meaning to Bible Belt).

But that’s exactly the way East Coast elitists view conservative Christians -- as barely literate crackpots who could explode at any moment. As Rosie O’Donnell explained on ABC’s “The View” in September, “Radical Christianity is just as threatening as radical Islam in a country like America where we have separation of church and state.”

Sneering at Christians is a favorite pastime of the cultural left. HBO’s Bill Maher calls politically active Christians “demagogues, con men and scolds.” CNN founder Ted Turner – always eloquent and to the point – pronounces Christianity “a religion for losers.”

Instead of fear and loathing, Pelosi uses the comically absurd to stigmatize evangelicals. Among other oddities, she presents the home-schooling family with 10 children, where the girls are identically attired in calico dresses– “The Stepford Wives” meets “Little House On The Prairie”

Occasionally, Pelosi gives the game away, as when she innocently asks the Cruisers for Christ, rallying with their classic cars, “So, do you think the Holy Spirit is here in this Burger King parking lot?”

Not everyone is treated like an escapee from a Fellini film. As a foil for the evangelicals interviewed in “Friends of God,” Pelosi chose Mel White, formerly a speechwriter for Jerry Falwell, now a gay activist.

White explains that people like Falwell aren’t really evil, but (presumably because they oppose gay marriage) hate people like him. We see White in Falwell’s church looking anguished for the congregants who are less enlightened than himself.

The HBO website says “Friends of God” is “driven by (*Pelosi’s*) unflagging curiosity and genuine interest in learning about this increasingly influential community,” as she “embarks on a fast-paced cross-country journey, offering snapshots of a cross section of evangelical America.”

Pelosi presents not a cross-section but the fringe. “Friends of God” is as representative of evangelicals as Ben Stiller’s mental-patient parents in “Meet The Fockers” are of Jews. But at least the latter doesn’t try to pass itself off as a documentary.