

The Tenth Parallel, by Eliza Griswold

reviewed by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [May 17, 2011](#) issue

In Review

DISPATCHES FROM THE FAULT LINE
BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

THE TENTH PARALLEL



ELIZA GRISWOLD

The Tenth Parallel

By Eliza Griswold
Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Eliza Griswold's book is a nearly perfect puzzle. On the one hand, she is doing some of the most important religious journalism being done these days. If God has, as one

of her interview subjects puts it, "moved his work to Africa," then Griswold possesses a sharp pair of eyes for God's new work. It doesn't hurt that Griswold writes like an angel and has an eye for irony and detail. On the other hand, Griswold doesn't understand Christianity very well. That's a drawback when covering the faith in Africa, and it's especially odd given that she is the daughter of former Episcopal presiding bishop Frank Griswold.

Griswold's skills are abundantly evident in her story of two friends in Nigeria who live near the tenth parallel, the "fault line" in Africa between Christianity and Islam. One is a Christian and the other is a Muslim, and together they speak out against religious violence even though the Muslim took off one of the Christian's limbs with a machete during an earlier upsurge in religious violence.

She is also deft at explaining how global warming is a prime instigator of religious violence all across Africa (as the desert expands, Muslims move south and conflict ensues). She describes how both Muslim identity (in the Philippines) and Christian identity (in the Sudan) can be used to carve out space against imperial aggressors, and she notes that neither faith has the resources to hold out against rapacious global capitalism. I was especially delighted by her portraits of militants in Indonesia—who with their vials of herbal medicine for sale look "a lot like a Mary Kay cosmetics concern"—and by her account of the militant *JihadMagz* with its impossibly peppy slogan (in English), "Always Making the World Better."

But I started to worry when, in an otherwise gritty and moving portrait of southern Sudan, she writes: "To defy the [Muslim] north, most of the villagers had been baptized as Episcopalians." This is not technically false: southern Sudanese often *are* members of the Episcopal Church of Sudan. Yet that church is rather different from the Episcopal Church in the U.S. And if you were to ask southern Sudanese why they took to the Christian faith, their first reason would be not to defy the north but to embrace Jesus. Griswold's description leaves us thinking of prep schools and country clubs in America.

This sort of carelessness appears in some offhand comments. Griswold says Muhammad and Jesus are the "incarnations of their respective faiths"—but what Christians say about the incarnation of God in Jesus is completely unlike what either faith teaches about Muhammad. She describes a Bible in which "Jesus's words were printed in red to show that they were absolute and unerring"—but of course many Christians think the whole Bible is unerring. She says that when Gene Robinson was

consecrated as the first openly gay bishop in the Anglican world, Peter Akinola, head of the breakaway Anglicans in Africa, "suddenly stood at a distance from my father." Suddenly? She describes the doctrine of two natures of Christ as "seemingly arcane" and the Trinity as "nonfamiliar." She describes Methodist communion as eating the body of Christ "in the unleavened bread" (news to this Methodist), and she refers to a Muslim who hoped to die "in a state of grace."

Griswold's account of an encounter with evangelist Franklin Graham is also puzzling. One of Graham's associates asked if she was saved. No one could possibly expect to be around a Graham event and avoid this question. But Griswold grows introspective, recalling her upbringing in a Philadelphia rectory, where "public religion"—CROP walks, social justice—was the order of the day. When Graham tells her salvation is a black-and-white affair—she is either saved or not—and quotes John 14:6 to her, she comments: "I later learned this was the Gospel According to John 14:6." She learned that verse only later? Then she prayed a sinner's prayer with Graham, sharing what she calls an "intimate act"—showing that she is a "compound of multiple identities," theologically, journalistically and otherwise. Graham is elated ("You came to Sudan to interview me, but I believe the Lord brought you here to pray with me"), but the prayer seems to have little effect on her.

These limitations don't spoil the book, but they made me wonder: if Griswold is this far off on topics I know something about, can I trust her on topics I don't know much about?

I noted above that the book is *almost* a perfect puzzle. Almost, because in fact it reflects closely her liberal Protestant identity. Her underlying conclusion (never stated so baldly) is that people are really all the same deep down, even if militant faiths clash. This conviction is clear in her efforts to empathize both with Muslim fundamentalists and with Christian missionaries. Though both groups think that she's going to hell, her portrait of each is tender, humane and at times beautiful.

Liberal Protestantism has its glories. Griswold is able to look compassionately and with critical attention at foreign faces precisely because she was taught to value diversity in her church and home of origin. It's not easy to regard "the other" with genuine generosity, but Griswold clears that bar with room to spare. The liberal Protestant weakness has always been its inability to love the faith of the church fiercely enough to pass it on to one's children and to strangers. That weakness is on unintended display here as well.