

GREG MORTENSON'S OWN CUP OF TEA

Luther Seminary's Mid-Winter Convocation has as a guest speaker Greg Mortenson, whose book, *Three Cups of Tea*, has been a best-seller since its release in 2006. Mortenson is the son of Minnesota Lutheran missionaries to Tanzania.

Three Cups tells the adventure-filled story of how Mortenson, a mountain climber, was forced to give up his ascent of the second-highest peak in the world, K2. Lost and rescued by Balti villagers, "Dr. Greg" goes on to build schools in the rugged mountains that straddle Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Three Cups is an odd book because Mortenson is one of the two authors of the book, yet the story is told in the third person. Mortenson is tall (6'4"); his height is noted often. He is referred to as a hero several times in every chapter and praised non-stop by the people around him.

Three Cups is being lauded as one of the best inspirational books of our day: If Mortenson can make peace and progress with the Muslims of Pakistan and Afghanistan, why can't we all?

To be sure, Mortenson is to be applauded for starting schools to teach children to read and write. He is providing a moderate Muslim alternative to the Wahhabi madrassas. That said, there are still reasons not to jump on the *Three Cups* bandwagon.

1. Mortenson prays to Allah. He boasts that he was never proselytized in Pakistan. Of course not. He worshipped with the Muslims and prayed to Allah:

"With Manzoor he [Mortenson] knelt and crossed his arms to address Allah respectfully. . . . As he pressed his forehead against the still-warm ground, Greg Mortenson realized that, for the first moment during all his days in Pakistan, no one was looking at him as an outsider. No one was looking at him at all. *Allah Akhbar*, he chanted quietly, God is great, adding his voice to the chorus. . ." (68).

Mortenson claims that Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship the same God. Moreover, he states in an interview: "All people of the *kitab* [Arabic for 'the book'], which means the Torah, Koran, and Bible, are accorded equal respect under Islam."

Except that Muslims are taught that Jews are pigs, Christians are tolerated only if they are submissive to Islam, and anyone who wishes to leave Islam should be killed. What Muslim country upholds religious freedom as Western countries do? None.

2. Mortenson educates girls but ignores the brutal repression of women under Islam:

- Female circumcision? He doesn't mention it.
- Polygamy? Child marriages? Glosses over them.
- Honor killings? Doesn't mention it.

Again, *Three Cups* is a sunny, angelic tale of how bad, old "ignorance" can be overcome. Did we mention that he is tall and praised non-stop by people around him?

3. Mortenson reduces evil to ignorance. In *Three Cups* Islam itself is not a problem, only ignorance:

"Working over there, I've learned a few things. I've learned that terror doesn't happen because some group of people somewhere like Pakistan or Afghanistan simply decide to hate us. It happens because children aren't being offered a bright enough future that they have a reason to choose life over death" (292).

"The enemy is ignorance. The only way to defeat it is to build relationships with these people, to draw them into **the modern world** with education and business. Otherwise the fight will go on forever" (310).

A simple diagnosis. A simple solution. Just write a check to Mortenson and be positive.

"**The modern world,**" however, is the *Western* world of *Western* freedoms – freedom to criticize, to join and leave any religion, equal rights for women, and the separation of church and state. Extremist Muslims reject the freedoms of this modern world.

According to Mortenson there are over 25,000 extremist madrassas in Pakistan. He has started 75+ basic skills schools, but even **his schools teach the Qur'an as inerrant revelation.**

Because all Muslims hold the Qur'an is inerrant and cannot be criticized, it is not realistic to expect Islam to be reformed. There are no simple solutions.

Three Cups of Tea is popular because it reinforces the modern Western belief that all people are basically the same and all are basically good. The book is a stylized chronicle. Everyone is nice. Every problem has a peaceful solution if only we can have a good chat over a cup of tea.

Other books about village life in Pakistan tell a darker story. These books will never make the New York Times best-seller list.

Have you heard that "Dr. Greg" is tall and praised non-stop by people around him?