

= The Most Hated Family in America =

The Most Hated Family in America is a 2007 BBC documentary film written and presented by Louis Theroux about the family at the core of the Westboro Baptist Church . The organization was led by Fred Phelps ( who has since died ) and located in Topeka , Kansas . Westboro Baptist Church members believe that the United States government is immoral due to its tolerance of homosexuality ; in addition , they protest at funerals of U.S. military killed in action with signs that display text such as " God Hates Fags " and " Thank God for Dead Soldiers " . With a BBC film crew , Theroux travelled to Kansas to spend time with members of the church and interview its leadership . In the documentary , church members are shown protesting at funerals of U.S. soldiers . Theroux interviews church leadership including Fred Phelps and Shirley Phelps @-@ Roper .

The documentary first aired on BBC Two in the United Kingdom in April 2007 . The documentary was a ratings success in its initial airing , beating simultaneous programming for BBC One for the 9pm hour . It was broadcast again on BBC Two later that month , and Seven Network purchased the programme for airing in Australia in August 2007 and again in April 2008 . It aired in May 2008 on TV3 and Seven Network , and multiple times in June 2008 on the television channel Dave . It aired again on BBC Two in December 2008 and in February 2010 in Ireland on 3e . A DVD @-@ box @-@ set including the documentary and other Theroux programmes was released in January 2009 ; The Independent placed the DVD release as number eight among its list of " The 50 Best DVD boxsets " .

The Most Hated Family in America received a positive reception , with four @-@ star ratings from publications The Daily Record and The Mail on Sunday . It was recommended in reviews as a critic 's choice by The Daily Mail , The Independent , The Times , Financial Times , The Age , and the Herald Sun . A review in the Leicester Mercury noted of Theroux 's interview techniques , " His subtle interviewing style was perfect for showing off the crazy views of the members . " The documentary was highlighted in The Sydney Morning Herald among " The week 's best " , and characterised as , " Disturbing , perplexing and very entertaining . "

A follow @-@ up documentary by Theroux , America 's Most Hated Family in Crisis , was first broadcast on BBC Two on 3 April 2011 .

= = Background = =

The documentary focuses on the Westboro Baptist Church , headed by Fred Phelps and based in Topeka , Kansas . Born in 1929 in Meridian , Mississippi , Phelps conducts himself under the belief that he is a prophet chosen by God " to preach his message of hate " . Phelps was ordained a Southern Baptist in 1947 . The Westboro Baptist Church was started by Phelps in 1955 . Members of the church meet in Phelps 's residence ; the majority of the group 's adherents are his family . Phelps received an associate 's degree from John Muir Junior College in 1951 , a bachelor 's degree in 1962 and a degree in law in 1964 from Washburn University . He formed a " crusade for righteousness " , attempting to abolish Jim Crow laws in Topeka .

In 1991 when a local park started to serve as a meeting place for homosexual men , Phelps began to protest against homosexuality . Phelps subsequently enlarged the scope of his activities and formed protests in areas where civil rights were being debated for LGBT people . Phelps received criticism in 1998 when he repeatedly exclaimed " Matt is in hell " during the funeral of Matthew Shepard , a man murdered for being homosexual .

Westboro Baptist Church bases its work around the belief that " God Hates Fags " , and expresses the opinion , based on its Biblical interpretation , that nearly every tragedy in the world is God 's punishment for homosexuality ? specifically society 's increasing tolerance and acceptance of gay , lesbian , and bisexual people . It maintains that God hates homosexuals above all other kinds of " sinners " and that homosexuality should be a capital crime . The church runs the website GodHatesFags.com , and GodHatesAmerica.com , and websites expressing condemnation of LGBT people , Roman Catholics , Muslims , Hindus , Jews , Sweden , Ireland , Canada , the Netherlands , and the United States . The organisation is monitored by the Anti @-@ Defamation League and is

classified as a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center . The group has achieved notoriety because of its picketing of funeral processions of U.S. soldiers killed in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan .

Controversial acts of Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church resulted in litigation and the formation of groups which counter @-@ protest against its efforts . President George W. Bush signed the Respect for America 's Fallen Heroes Act into law in on Memorial Day in May 2006 . Groups of American Legion members formed motorcycle honor guards , such as the Patriot Guard Riders , with the intention of safeguarding funerals of U.S. military from the church protesters . Another group , called " Free Republic , " held signs praising the military .

= = Content = =

The Most Hated Family in America includes footage of members of the Westboro Baptist Church picketing at funerals of United States soldiers . The organisation members hold signs blaming deaths of U.S. soldiers on the country 's tolerance towards homosexuality and LGBT people . Westboro Baptist Church members believe that these deaths are caused by God as retribution for the immorality of the U.S. ; stating the soldiers were " struck down by God for fighting for a depraved nation " .

They attend the funeral of a soldier Kevin Zeigler who died at the age of 31 while attempting to disable a bomb in Iraq . Referring to improvised explosive devices , Westboro Baptist Church hold signs reading , " Thank God for IEDs " . Protest signs carried by members of the organisation at the funeral , including six @-@ year @-@ old children , state : " Thank God For Dead Soldiers " , " Don 't Worship The Dead " and " Fag Marines " . Another placard criticises Diana , Princess of Wales , for her friendship with the LGBT community , stating , " Royal Whore In Hell " . Diana is criticised by the organisation as a " fag enabler " . Additional signs read " God hates fags " , " Thank God for Dead Soldiers " , " God is America 's Terrorist " , and " Fag Troops " . The Westboro Baptist Church members reveled in the September 11 attacks and stated they were punishment for the country 's " fornication and lust " . The group also protests outside the local synagogue and holds signs which state that , " Jews worship the rectum " .

Theroux interviews members of the Phelps family including Fred Phelps ( called " Gramps " by members of the organisation ) and Shirley Phelps @-@ Roper . Theroux asks Fred Phelps , " Isn 't it an act of presumption , when you don 't have all the information about all the other churches , to assume you have privileged access to Grace ? " ; Phelps responds , " Oh , I know all there is to know about ' em . " When Theroux asks him how he knows this , Phelps answers , " I 'm not going to keep on talking to you . I know what you are . ? you 're an evil . ? I don 't even wanna go there . Good luck to ya ! " .

= = Filmmaker = =

Theroux traveled from the United Kingdom to Kansas , United States to meet members of the Westboro Baptist Church . Theroux and a BBC film crew spent three weeks in Topeka , Kansas , gathering information on the 71 members of the organisation . In an article for The Guardian , Theroux noted , " It was fascinating to see the power of a family to create its own bizarre ideology and pass it down through the generations . " In a statement in The Age , Theroux posited , " Maybe , through my enthusiasm , people reveal more of themselves than they may have intended . The show is laughing at me , adrift in their world , as much as at them . " The Western Mail quoted Theroux on how he selects subject matter which interests him , " The subjects I 'm interested in are quite extreme . They 're so far beyond the pale of normal human interaction that you 're never going to get a reality show on that territory . "

In an interview with BBC News , Theroux stated that the Phelps are the most extreme people he has ever met . Theroux gave his opinion on the teachings of Fred Phelps . Theroux stated , " I think that the pastor is not a very nice person . I think he 's an angry person who 's twisted the Bible and picked and chosen verses that support his anger , that sort of justify his anger , and he 's instilled

that in his children and they 've passed it on to their children . Although the second and third generation are by and large quite nice people from what I saw , they still live under the influence of their Gramps . "

Apart from their protests , Theroux found them to be quite kind , and commented , " It shows you what strange avenues the religious impulse can take you down . I think another part of the answer is that parts of the Christian Bible are pretty weird . There 's a lot of weird stuff in there and when you take that and you add this angry , domineering kind of a father figure , which is Gramps , and you add that he has sort of separated them off from other people , other families and driven them to achieve a lot , and he was kind of a charismatic guy , and still is up to a point . He was a very verbal , very persuasive , an extremely compelling speaker . All these things added together combined to make a powerful influence . "

= = Reception = =

= = = Response from organization = = =

The Westboro Baptist Church appreciated the attention its organisation received from the documentary , and added a citation to the film on its website . Shirley Phelps @-@ Roper stated she had one regret about the documentary : " If he had just called it , ' The Most Hated Family in the World ' " . The Washington Post reported , " In the last hours of the last days , she explained , Jesus said his chosen will be ' hated by all men . ' " "

On April 8 , 2007 , Fred Phelps Sr preached a sermon addressing Louis Theroux directly and personally , accusing Theroux of taking " cheap unfair advantage " of the young women in the church , and trying to embarrass them about their chastity . Phelps also stated that Theroux " contrives and manipulates those he interviews " , accusing him of feigning naïvety on camera .

= = = Release and ratings = = =

The Most Hated Family in America aired on BBC Two on 1 April 2007 . The Guardian characterised its performance as " a ratings hit " . The film received 19 percent of viewership between the 9pm to 10pm hour , and beat programming for BBC One for the same time period . The documentary received 4 @-@ 3 million viewers while the programme which aired at the same time on BBC One only drew 1 @-@ 8 million viewers . The Most Hated Family in America was again aired on BBC Two on 4 April 2007 .

In August 2007 , Seven Network of Australia purchased a package of programmes from the BBC including The Most Hated Family in America and two other specials by Theroux : Under the Knife and Gambling in Las Vegas . In April 2008 , Seven Network purchased The Most Hated Family in America and the same two other programmes from the BBC , with an additional two documentaries by Theroux added : Behind Bars and African Hunting Holiday . In May 2008 , the documentary aired on TV3 . The documentary aired in Australia on Seven Network in May 2008 . It aired again in the UK on 21 and 26 June 2008 on the television channel Dave . The documentary aired again on BBC Two on 18 December 2008 .

In January 2009 , The Most Hated Family in America was released as part of a DVD boxed set in PAL region 2 format , along with African Hunting Holiday , Under The Knife , Behind Bars , and Gambling In Las Vegas . Titled , Louis Theroux : The Strange and The Dangerous , the DVD set received a four @-@ out @-@ of @-@ four @-@ star recommendation from The Daily Record . In February 2009 , The Independent placed the DVD release as number eight among its list of " The 50 Best DVD boxsets " , and characterised The Most Hated Family in America as the " strangest episode of the set , and by far the most disturbing " . The documentary aired in Ireland on 10 February 2010 on 3e and was given a four @-@ out @-@ of @-@ four star recommendation by The Mail on Sunday .

= = = Critical reception = = =

Writing for The Times , journalist David Chater highlighted The Most Hated Family in America among selections for " Chater 's Choice " . Chater commented , " Louis Theroux undertakes his ugliest assignment to date . " Chater concluded , " Theroux deploys all his logic and charm to find the humanity beneath the rhetoric , but ultimately fails . It is difficult to reason with people who think that holding up a placard proclaiming ' Jews worship the rectum ' is ' a courteous and loving ' thing to do . " The film was highlighted in the Liverpool Echo as " Sunday 's : Pick of the day " . Peter Grant of the Liverpool Echo commented , " Louis Theroux took a trip to Kansas for his documentary , The Most Hated Family in America . His profile of Westboro Baptist Church , the home of America 's most fanatical Christian fundamentalists , was astonishing . " Karl French of Financial Times selected the film as his " Critic 's Choice " . French wrote positively of the documentary , " After painting himself into an oddball- documentary corner a few years back , Theroux wisely took a long break , and he 's come back refreshed , as confirmed by this film . In the way it reveals the comic horror inherent in all forms of zealotry , it is every bit as compelling as Theroux 's recent Vegas documentary . " The Mail on Sunday critic Tom Cox rated the documentary as four out of four stars . Cox wrote of Theroux , " His attempts to challenge the beliefs of the Phelps clan ? a 71 @-@ strong congregation who picket military funerals with ' America Is Doomed ' signs ? and fuddle them with good nature and erudition were impressive , but ultimately as futile as an attempt to teach a cat algebra . "

Writing for The Scotsman , Andrea Mullaney articulated , " Theroux really had found the ultimate in weirdness for his latest documentary ? they 're so beyond the point of reason , into a self @-@ perpetuating psychosis , that no matter how he tried , he couldn 't challenge their beamingly @-@ delivered pronouncements , or trip them up . But he did manage to show them as human beings ( more than the courtesy they extend to us sinners ) . " Hilary Fannin of The Irish Times commented that the airing of the documentary , " saw Louis Theroux , in The Most Hated Family in America , shatter another redneck American target , the Westboro Baptist Church " . In a review of the documentary for The Sunday Times , Roland White discussed Theroux 's stylistic technique , " Theroux 's usual technique ? the friendly ingenué ? made absolutely no impact on these people . It was like watching a youngster from a village cricket team trying to bowl out Geoff Boycott , and I began to wonder what Theroux was hoping to achieve . It is impossible to out ? argue the religious bigot . They have impeccable logic on their side : the word of God is the righteous truth ; only they understand the true word of the Lord ; therefore , they are right and everybody else is wrong . " Liverpool Daily Post recommended the film in its column , " Sunday : What to Watch " . Writing for the Birmingham Mail , Graham Young observed , " The Most Hated Family in America is the best documentary from Louis since long before his Michael Jackson fiasco . " John Dugdale of The Sunday Times highlighted the film as his " Pick of the day " . Dugdale wrote favorably of the film , " There are echoes of Theroux 's film about a woman raising her daughters as neo @-@ Nazis as he watches Phelps ' daughter , Shirley , handing out placards to kids as young as seven . While tangling with her and her dad is pointless , the family 's younger women are less inflexible , and his encounters with them are more rewarding . " A review in the Leicester Mercury noted of Theroux 's interview techniques , " His subtle interviewing style was perfect for showing off the crazy views of the members . "

Writing in The Independent , Cathy Pryor declared , " Louis Theroux is out @-@ oddballed this week by the subject of his latest documentary ... Astonishingly , Theroux makes you feel some sympathy for them and the price they pay for being the way they are . " Thomas Sutcliffe of The Independent posited that viewers were " ... [ left ] wondering , after an hour , whether the Phelps hadn 't got a bit more out of it than Louis . They aren 't representative of anything but themselves , after all , and they rejoice in the world 's detestation . So they had nothing to lose by being held up to ridicule , and gained exactly what they want ? a bigger audience for their insane rantings . " Writing for The Daily Record , Paul English wrote favorably , " The journalist in me marvels at yet more great work from Theroux . But the human in me mourns that we gave this appalling family exactly what they want . The shiny badge of notoriety ... " A review in the Irish Independent was critical of

giving any coverage to the group , " Theroux tried to get the teenage daughters to deviate from the standard family line but they weren 't budging an inch . The end result was that a group of loathsome people who spend every second of their lives trying to attract free publicity for themselves got a whole hour of it courtesy of the BBC . Ah , the joys of public service television . " Writing for The Observer , Kathryn Flett was critical of the choice of title for the documentary , commenting , " The Most Hated Family in America ? Says who ? Louis Theroux ? BBC2 ? Ooh , I don 't like a sweeping statement of a documentary title . Not that the family who comprise the majority of the 71 congregants of the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka , Kansas , aren 't appalling , but the title definitely infers that they are the family most hated by most Americans , when I doubt most Americans have the faintest idea who they are . " Mike Bradley of The Observer commented about the film , " A shock doc , but an easy target for Theroux . "

In a review for the Melbourne , Australia newspaper , The Age , Larry Schwartz selected the documentary as " Critic 's Choice " . Schwartz was critical of Theroux 's lack of detachment from his subject matter , " He repeatedly distances himself from the church , expressing his disapproval of their views . But so concerned is he , he seems almost evangelical in his determination to show them the error of their ways . " The documentary was highlighted in The Sydney Morning Herald among " The week 's best " , and critic Greg Hassall characterised it as , " Disturbing , perplexing and very entertaining . " The Australia newspaper MX highlighted the documentary favorably , in its column , " Best in show " . Cameron Adams of the Herald Sun selected The Most Hated Family in America as his " Top Choice " recommendation . Adams wrote , " A truly disturbing , disgusting and sad documentary . The repellent Shirley Phelps is the outspoken nutbag who got publicity by calling Heath Ledger a ' fag enabler ' after his death . This jaw @-@ dropping doco infiltrates Phelps ' only @-@ in @-@ America church where her 11 spooky kids regularly picket funerals of US soldiers killed in Iraq ? they believe God killed them to show his hatred of how ' depraved ' America now is . "

= = Follow @-@ up = =

Theroux returned to Westboro Baptist Church for a follow @-@ up documentary four years after making The Most Hated Family in America , to investigate the departure of several members of the Phelps family since his last visit . The film , America 's Most Hated Family in Crisis , was first broadcast on BBC Two on 3 April 2011 . Theroux 's return was prompted by an email he received from a young member of the church he had interviewed previously , who had since left and been disfellowed . The US Supreme Court case of Snyder v. Phelps , heard following the suing of Westboro Baptist Church for distress caused by the picketing of the funeral of a US Marine killed in Iraq , formed the background to the new film . Theroux was interested in the ambivalent attitude of church members towards his first film , and stated that " the new documentary feels quite different than the original ? though still funny , a little darker and stranger " .