

Perhaps you have heard it, too—those forecasts—no, those *pontifications* that religion is on its way out and that, given all the harm religion has done, it's a good thing. Proponents of this view, if anything, however, must not read the newspaper or listen to the daily news in almost any week of the year. Take, for example, the news from just the last few weeks. The most recent issue of *The Christian Century* reports a Gallup International poll comparing the varying degrees to which the populations of different countries position themselves on the matter of religion. The percentages of those who declared themselves religious included Ghana at 96%; Nigeria at 93%; Armenia and Fiji at 92%; Macedonia at 90%; Romania at 89%; Peru at 86%; Brazil at 85%; and the United States at 60%. On the other hand, the percentages of people who declared themselves to be atheist included China—47%; Japan—31%; the Czech Republic—30%; France—29%; Germany—15%; South Korea—15%; the Netherlands—14%; Australia, Austria, Iceland, and Ireland—10%; and the United States—5% [September 19, 2012, p. 9].

The same issue of the *Century* reports a billboard purchased by the American Atheists organization near the site of the Democratic Convention in Charlotte charging that Christianity promotes hate and exalts a useless savior. The organization sought to put up a billboard deriding the Mormon faith near the Republican Convention in Tampa as well, but could not find anyone to sell them the space.

Add to this the hasty action at the Democratic Convention to put reference to God in the Democratic Platform after encountering criticism for omitting it. Larry and I could not help but chuckle with Jon Stewart over the debacle when he questioned on the "Daily Show" the seeming insecurity of a God who would feel slighted at not being mentioned—if, indeed, God did have a problem with it.

All of this was taking place when East Tennessee received the gladsome news that Sevier County had been selected as the location for a white supremacist group's annual gathering, and we began to look forward with dread to the national spectacle of hate infested rhetoric laced with a warped interpretation of the Christian faith spewing forth in our midst.

All of this seemed to pale, however, in comparison to the outbreak of demonstrations in protest of the video *Innocence of Muslims*, produced apparently in the United States by a filmmaker with ties to Coptic Christian groups and a checkered, to put it mildly, past. (A spokesperson for Coptic Christians, by the way, vehemently denied that such an attack on the Islamic faith represented his group). The airways have been flooded with the voices of Muslims insisting that the ensuing violence resulting in the deaths of the four American diplomats is contrary to Islam and does not reverence the teachings of the Koran. Christians have similarly raised their voices, insisting that spewing hatred in the name of Christ is not Christian and does not represent the teachings of Jesus.

In a world of global communications, we have found that vitriol once spewed in the privacy of secluded, provincial quarters no longer remains there. Words of hatred go viral, whipping up a world of animosity and hurt. I recall when almost 30 years ago, the president of what was then my denomination piously announced, "God does not hear the prayer of a Jew." In a day when the Internet was still in its youth, the news, to our deep embarrassment, spread like wildfire; and it wasn't made any better when shortly after that he joked from the pulpit of his church that he didn't know why God had chosen the Jews, who, after all, have "funny noses."

If we are honest, and it's good to be honest in church, we have to acknowledge with the despisers of religion that religion has been and too often still is the source of the world's most bitter enmity, the world's most bitter wars. I recall a line from Tennessee author Will Campbell's *The Convention*, a novel about the break-up of the Southern Baptist Convention, when a character sympathetically observes that a cut from stained glass is the worst kind. And it is. Pain inflicted by a religious attack whether upon those within our faith community or those outside is the worst kind of pain; and this is true not just of other religions, of *their* religion, but for our religion as well. As we censure the extremities of the religion of others, we must also acknowledge and censure the inquisitions, the witch hunts, the skinheads, the self-righteous venom spewed in the name of Christ and contrary to the spirit of Christ.

Our words, our witness these days matter greatly. Once we were called to bear witness to Christ in the very narrow sense of converting those outside our faith to Christ. Based upon a lifetime of experience, however, we have come to acknowledge together in our covenant that although we believe that God was in Christ reconciling the world, "we set no limit on the reach of God's love or the activity of

God beyond the experience and faith of Christians.” We are in agreement that we will not seek to convert other people from their faith traditions; but during this summer’s effort to speak Christian, to reinvest the terminology of our faith with a deep meaning by which and with which we can live, what can we say positively about how we see ourselves bearing witness to the faith that we hold?

**Our witness is rooted in our experience of a God of love.** The original meaning of the word *martus*, the Greek word rendered “martyr” or “witness” in Christian scriptures, signifies one who remembers, one who has knowledge of something by recollection and who can thus speak of it. It recalls the legal scene of a witness bearing testimony in court. Faithful, honest, truthful witness was of the highest priority in the Hebrew legal code. Multiple witnesses were necessary to rendering a guilty verdict. Careless, overly hasty testimony was met with contempt (Ex. 23:1-2), and intentionally false witness was to be met with “no pity” and the judgment that would have been rendered against the defendant if found guilty was to be rendered instead against the false accuser (Deut. 19:16-21). In Christian scriptures, the word *martus* or *martyreo* came to be linked with the experience of dying for one’s faith. Reflecting the martyrdom of faithful Jews of the second century B.C.E. who died for their faith at the hands of Antiochus Epiphanes (literally “god manifest”), martyr and witness became inseparably linked. Martyrs, given the opportunity before the Roman authorities to renounce their faith, gave voice to their faith instead, their very lives, thus becoming their witness.

Enter Deutero-Isaiah or Second Isaiah: Depicting in chapters 42 and 43 a trial scene convened by God where the gods of the nation are put on trial to determine the one who is truly God, representatives from each nation are given an opportunity to bear witness on behalf of its God: “Let them bring their witnesses to justify them, and let them hear and say, ‘It is true,’” Isaiah depicts God as saying (v. 9); but “*you are my witnesses*, says the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen” (v. 10). Strangely, the very witnesses upon whom God depends are a people “who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears” (v. 8). They are, in other words, a people who have forgotten their history. They have forgotten God’s saving acts in history. In a situation where memory is crucial, they have no memory. And thus, Isaiah depicts God insistently pleading, seeking to remind them, seeking to call to memory the covenant relationship that has sustained them through the ages:

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God . . . you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you” (43:1-4).

“Because I love you,” Paul Hanson observes,

is the kind of language that can bring the unfaithful back to their senses. It can bring back to mind the long history of the covenant relationship. It can restore to the consciousness of the witness the astonishing realization that God has been present through everything, through good times as well as bad, in deliverance as well as in punishment [Interpretation: Isaiah 40-66, p. 68.

The people, it is true, who are called to bear witness are imperfect. They always are. The focus is not upon them but upon the nature, the history, the covenant faithfulness of the one who calls. When it comes to bearing witness, we would do well to remember the imperfection of all of God’s witnesses. Our tendency is to idealize those who can bear witness for God as if they exist on some plane other than their own. Yet be sure, these witnesses to whom God is proclaiming God’s love are anything but ideal. Isaiah gives no hint, no hint at all, that they are intrinsically morally superior nor that they are about to morph into super heroes of their own making. The focus is not upon the witnesses’ unique characteristics other than being loved of God and graced by God’s presence. The secret is just here: it resides in the very nature of the God to whom they will bear witness. “For Israel’s God [and our God],” Paul Hanson observes, “is Immanuel, ‘God with us.’” Remember, Isaiah is saying, and bear witness to just that God.

**Our experience of God’s love makes us ambassadors of reconciliation.** The imperfection, the everyday character of the witnesses is important for us to remember because it is a reminder that we, too, have a story to tell, a life to live consistent with the God we have known to be present to us. It cautions us not to resort to exaggerated claims for ourselves. Jewish history, Christian history and the history of the other major world religions are littered with the bodies of both those within their own

movements who have had the audacity to think new thoughts and to be open to the new thing God was doing in their midst as well as with the bodies of peoples of other faiths or of no faith. The God who comes to us in love is not a God who bids us to become mini-gods, turned loose to re-create the world and all the people of the world in our own image. The God who comes to us in love bids us to join in the reconciling, saving work God is continuing to do in the world in which we live.

The God who takes down the walls of division that have separated us from God and one another for far too long commissions us to take down the walls of enmity and division that remain. Bearing witness to just this kind of God puts us to the task of taking down the walls people acting in God's name often put up against honest, open research and discovery. It puts us to the task of removing walls against education as if somehow God is quite fragile and insecure and in danger of being destroyed by our learning. Encountering the God of love we know in Christ places before us the task of taking down walls of enmity built to exclude those who are different, whether they are different by political party, gender, race, nationality, socio-economic status or sexual orientation.

We do, oh yes, we do have a witness to bear; and it is as critical as that of any generation before us. That witness is not about brandishing power to make the world bend to our particular brand of theology or to use our terminology. It is a witness that springs from the living memory of the kind of God we worship and then spending a lifetime seeking to live our lives and shape our world into a living reminder of the gracious love we have encountered there.

Brian McLaren, leader in the emerging church movement and author of *Why Did Jesus, Moses, The Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?* reflects on his limited exposure to people of other faiths in his early church experience. He recalls that to the extent that those with whom he went to church dealt with persons of other religions at all, it was for the purpose of converting them to Christianity. Regarding the hostility and barbs being traded among religions today, McLaren asks, "What would the ancient founders of these religions do if they encountered one another alongside the road?" Would they push and shove? Would they demand that the others give them and their faith priority? Or would they have the confidence, the generosity, the openness of spirit to sit down and learn from one another? "Would Jesus," McLaren asks,

push Moses aside and demand to cross first, claiming that his ancestor's failed religion had been forever superseded by his own? Would he trade insults with Mohammed, claiming his crusaders could whup Mohammed's jihadists any day of the week, demanding that Mohammed cross behind, not beside him? Would Jesus demand the Buddha kneel at his feet and demonstrate submission before letting him cross? Or would he walk with them and, once on the other side, welcome each to a table of fellowship, not demanding any special status or privileges, maybe even taking the role of a servant — hanging up their coats, getting them something to eat and drink, making sure each felt welcome, safe, and at home?

From what I know about the warm hospitality and welcome of Jesus, I suspect the latter, don't you? What more, then, can we who have met the loving grace of God in him do than to pronounce an end to our frightened, warring, competitive ways and live our lives every day as a witness to the God of welcome and peace?