

## Cutting at Christianity

It's a religious prejudice you can get away with — the casual denigration of Christians.

**By Nora Gallagher**

It's become fashionable to take shots at the Christian religion. In a lot of otherwise civilized circles, the faithful and the faith itself are an easy object of prejudice; and worse, it's a prejudice you can get away with.

A couple of weeks ago, a reviewer in the New York Times Book Review wrote that she “resents and fears Christianity not only for its sexism and incitement of violence but for its deadening effect on the imagination.” This was a throwaway sentence, an assertion with nothing to back it up.

Here's another example. I'm sitting at lunch with a group of friends in Berkeley, and a woman I've just met, who doesn't know that I attend an Episcopal church, tells a story about trying to decide where her son should go to high school. They've toured a few places, one of them Catholic — well regarded, she says — “But can you believe this! They had crucifixes on the walls everywhere! I don't think I could stand seeing *that* every day!”

Or this e-mail sent around after the November 2004 election: a U.S. map, with the red states marked “Jesusland.”

Recent books that are contemptuous of religion in general — Sam Harris' “The End of Faith” and Daniel Dennett's “Breaking the Spell:

Religion as a Natural Phenomenon” — compare the worst of Christianity with the best of reason. In Harris, we read about the medieval Catholic Church: the Inquisition, witch trials and burnings and, in our century, the “Christian theology responsible for the Holocaust.” Dennett refers to people who share his antireligious views as “brights” who “have the lowest divorce rate in the United States,” while “born-again Christians [have] the highest.” Neither man mentions the way unfettered reason, in the form of science, presents us with conundrums like the atom bomb.

I call it secular fundamentalism — one more example of the strict maintenance of doctrine, without actual experience of “the other,” a bubble that actively screens out different points of view. What secular fundamentalists ignore is that ad hominem attacks on Christianity make permissible ad hominem attacks on any religion or philosophy. Who’s next?

And yet when I search my heart and mind, I understand some of the resentment and rage that lie at the core of the callous remarks and anti-Christian books. Christianity has long been intertwined with the state, ever since the Roman Emperor Constantine made it his pet religion. It has always been the dominant religion in the United States, and it is now way too closely connected to the corridors of power. The “God” Congress prays to is a Christian God; so is the God in the Pledge of Allegiance and the one on our dollar bills. This is the God of the Christian right, the God of “values” politics. And it’s even the God the Democrats want to use to wrap up faith in a new package in order to win elections.

The connection between Christianity and political power is enough to make this believer hang her head. And yet to attack this Christianity as all of Christianity is, of course, an error. It ignores the fact that medieval

Christianity was reformed — by Martin Luther and the Church of England, among others. But most of all, it neglects a history that includes someone such as the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who organized the Confessing Church to resist Nazi exclusion laws, joined the plot to assassinate Hitler and paid for it with his life.

Bonhoeffer believed that the heart of what it meant to be a Christian was to act on behalf of the marginalized — the helpless, the sick, the poor, the friendless. He distinguished between what he called “cheap grace,” that form of lip service I think we can all identify with, and “costly grace,” meaning the kind that gets you into trouble.

If I think of costly grace, I remember the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks; the abolitionists; the Christians of Jubilee 2000 who successfully pressured England and the United States to forgive the developing world’s crippling debt; the Quakers who protect and advise pacifists; the women and men who work daily in soup kitchens, for living-wage ordinances, against torture at Guantanamo Bay. None of us have done enough, and that is partly why so many people only know about the Christianity that cozies up to power.

The best of the recent critiques of religion suggest that we should lift the taboo against conversation about religion at our dinner tables. I agree. Christians who see the world differently from George W. Bush and James Dobson must find a way to speak up and not only defend but fully describe our faith.

Many more Christians must show the secular world that there is another face to our religion, by following Bonhoeffer’s and King’s examples. It’s a good time for a new Confessing Church.

And, yes, we should examine our faith constantly in the sweet light of human reason rather than believing, as the White Queen said to Alice, “six impossible things before breakfast.” Faith is only an approximation, like memory; I am never sure I have the real thing in my grasp. If I could, I’d return to early Christianity, before it became a state religion under Constantine, before its connection to the state, when it was a company of friends whose inspired leader once said that the one without sin should pick up the first stone.