

“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

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Religion talk. Conversation on religion has a lot to do with the language we use. For example, are you religious? Or, are you spiritual?

Apart from the obvious overlap, there’s a difference; and it has a lot to do how we view organized religion. Let’s tell the truth: organized religion has been having a bad decade, or perhaps a couple or a triplet of bad decades.

This is the *not-surprising* conclusion of a new study (2008), the American Religious Identification Survey, conducted by researchers at Trinity College in Hartford, Ct. The poll of over 54,000 American adults found a sharp decline in the number of people claiming religious affiliation.

For example, the number of people who call themselves *Christian* is 76 percent, down ten percentage points from a 1990 survey. Even more revealing is that in 1990, 8.2 percent (about 14 million) of respondents said *none* when asked to identify their religion. In 2008, 15 percent (34 million) made this same claim.

Ultimate claims? Forever, much of what is contentious in religion flows out of the ultimate claims its adherents make. Claims of absolute rightness of one’s beliefs, rendering all other claims (i.e., the claims of a Jew or a Muslim, or, within Christianity, of exclusivist fundamentalists) inferior or false—understandably—create an immediate divide.

Indeed, who among us wants to hear that our faith commitments are less holy or less true than those of someone else?

Part of what is both inviting and of concern about religion—both exhilarating and repugnant—is that it offers the best and the worst of our human experience. Almost always, this has to do with interpretation. How do we interpret our sacred writings and what conclusions do we make about them?

In the Christian faith, for example, the *way* we read the Bible is critical. If we read the Bible literally, assuming that every word and story are to be believed in a literal way (i.e., the miracles literally happened as opposed to being metaphors for a larger truth), we end up with a dimly lit (i.e., reduced) version of biblical truth.

In fact, the claims of literalism with regard to the Bible are one of the major stumbling blocks for prospective believers in the 21st century. On the other hand, if we read the Bible as metaphor and as story, the underlying beauty and enduring truth of the Bible take us to a whole different place.

Literalists who seek to reduce the Bible to science (i.e., the world was created in six days) and actual history (God's wrath on one nation or another) serve to diminish the Bible and its potential to influence and inspire.

In this same vein, much of the fallout in religion in recent decades is due to inadequate models of interpretation. The common interpretation floating about in our wider American culture simply does *not* measure up to the modern experience of increasing numbers of people.

For example, what we *know* about the world (from science or history) does *not* need to be a disconnect between how we view God (our theology) and the way we understand the Bible.

The key to the Bible is *how* we read it (literally, or as metaphor and story). The key to prayer is *how* we use it (to manipulate and control, or to approach God with a gracious heart and a humble spirit); and the key to salvation is *how* we understand it (as mystery, or as a reality about which human beings can make judgmental pronouncements).

Towards a new religious awareness. I understand how *religion* became such a bad word for much of our American culture. The answer in a nutshell: bad (inadequate) interpretation of our sacred writings.

However, on the other side of the fence, there's no small amount of *enlightened* (where the *light* of God's wisdom and truth shines through) theology and biblical scholarship out there. Their voices are simply not the dominant voices of our culture. In other words, large groups of people don't tend to know about them.

Put another way, the mega churches of our time (who receive the vast majority of news coverage) do *not* generally have the most enlightened theological minds and voices leading the way. Their leaders are talented and are expert promoters of their *message*. But for increasing numbers of Americans (i.e., the ones who checked *none* when asked to identify their religion), their message does not resonate with modern experience.