



Prez Release

The Growing Threat

We are facing some new and aggressive opposition, not only to Christianity, but to people of faith in general. Predictably it rises from the cultural elites that rule the publishing houses, movies studios and media network offices in North America and Western Europe. Book publishers are turning out best sellers like Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, that suggests all religion is socially dangerous and calls for a removal of respect for anything so destructive to the world. Publishers have found that this kind of shock literature plays really well and there are huge profits to be made with the brilliant and scathing rhetoric that these volumes contain. Another of these rhetorical scud missiles is Sam Harris' recent *Letter to a Christian Nation* which calls religion a travesty of good ethical behavior and champions what he calls a conversational intolerance for all things religious. He has even more contempt for Islam and anyone who might consider themselves moderate in their faith commitment is labeled as complicit with the travesty created by religion.

Media offers us a growing diet of such movie blockbusters as the *DaVinci Code*. The growing addiction in the Western world to novel and sensational themes portraying the DNA of all faith traditions as bizarre, effectively secures viewers. "New discoveries" showcasing recently uncovered information, which will change the course of Christianity, fills the documentary genre with such supposedly, faith threatening offerings like the *Gospel of Judas* and James Cameron's discovery of the real tomb of Jesus' earthly family. Coincidentally, these special discoveries seem to arrive around Christmas and Easter and are based on information that has been available to scholarly communities for decades. Even the most avowed secular academics have critiqued these new discoveries as media pleasers with little substance, but the addiction of the viewers seems to trump the facts.

Rosie O'Donnell, when she isn't busy trading snide remarks with Donald Trump, offers her view that radical Christianity (which would be anyone who takes their faith seriously) is just as threatening as radical Islam. Bill Maher, who can't seem to get past the mean nun in his Catholic school experience, excoriates Christians as "just demagogues, con men and scolds."

When descriptors of people of faith, (particularly evangelical Christians) include “murderously intolerant,” “yearning for apocalyptic violence” and “fevered by religious radicalism” it is easy to wonder what has caused this noticeable rise in animosity. One response is to go into a mode of defensiveness and throw our objections over the barriers we have created. While there are moments that I get defensive about these growing realities, I am not so sure that the fortress mentality will be the most productive stance as we look to this phenomenon growing in the 21st century. The real core of the issue is that the information centers are ruled by folks with an aggressive secularist agenda. They are in the minority, but their influence is monumental because they shape our culture through the information and super superhighways that control the 21st century. These current circumstances call for reasoned responses that engage this secularist agenda with substantive rhetoric.

One such voice, Stephen Prothero of Boston University, has written a new book called *Religious Literacy*. He argues that the cost of not knowing about religion is too high in a world in which religion is so volatile. He names six links in a chain of religious education that once made Americans knowledgeable about religion. These links were churches, schools, households, Sunday Schools, colleges and Bible and tract societies. Prothero clearly lays part of the blame for our current dilemma at the feet of Christians who he says have placed more emphasis on sentimental views of God than obedience to biblical directives. In addition, they have used their Sunday Schools and other educational efforts to entertain their children with nice moral ideas rather than learning directly the truth of biblical texts. The irony we face in the US is that two-thirds of our population believes that the Bible is the source for life’s question, but only half can name one of the Gospels.

We would also do well to compare our experience with Christians around the world. Animosity that ranges from Bill Maher’s caustic rhetoric to jihads that call for the destruction of infidels will most likely increase in the 21st century. We seem to have missed the words in John’s Gospel (1:5) that offers us the continuing reality that darkness doesn’t comprehend light and even has an aversion to the light which Jesus came to offer. The sobering fact is, where Christianity is the most vital, opposition to followers of Jesus is the most aggressive. Hebrews 11 and 12 was first read by followers of Jesus who understood what it meant to have their faith aggressively opposed. They were a minority population and treated as such.

Winston Churchill described the dark days before World War II as the “gathering storm.” That aptly described the early 21st century for followers of Jesus. Speaking of Jesus, the author of Hebrews, writes, “Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” My guess is that Hebrews 11 and 12 will be part of my Bible study more and more in days to come.

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