

YOUR GOD IS TOO SMALL

In one of his tall tales, Mark Twain tells how upset he had become about the considerable amount of discord among God's creatures, and how he had decided to do something about it. Twain writes:

“So I built a cage, and in it I put a dog and a cat. And after a little training I got the dog and the cat to the point where they lived peaceably together. Then I introduced a pig, a goat, a kangaroo, some birds and a monkey. And, after a few adjustments, they learned to live in harmony. So encouraged was I by such successes that I added an Irish Catholic, a Presbyterian, a Jew, a Muslim from Turkistan, and a Buddhist from China, along with a Baptist missionary that I captured on the same trip. And in a very short while there wasn't a single living thing left in the cage.”

Ain't it the truth!. Sadly, religious wars have marked world history since the earliest recorded times.

The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh put it very succinctly: “When we believe that ours is the only faith that contains the truth, violence and suffering will surely be the result.”

When Jesus said to those first disciples, “Follow me,” do you think he had any idea that there would be so many different denominations, all claiming that their way is the only way?

Some forty years ago J. B. Phillips wrote a wonderful little book called *Your God Is Too Small*. I've been haunted by that title ever since. I grew up in an Episcopal ghetto in a Philadelphia suburb in the 40s and 50s. Almost all my friends were Episcopalian, and my parents' friends as well. If you'd asked me I would have said that God was an Episcopalian, who looked like me. In college my roommate and best friend was a strict Roman Catholic, and he helped me realize that maybe, just maybe, God was also Roman Catholic. Gradually, after three years in the Navy, with all sorts and conditions (and I mean ALL sorts and conditions!), I got to know a Methodist chaplain on board the aircraft carrier, and my God expanded once again. Wasn't my God the same God for all Christians?

Particularly after September 11, our horizons have expanded to include relations with the other religions of the world. We're more aware of Muslims, who tell us that their religion is really a religion of peace, and that the terrorist attacks were as much an aberration of Islam as the bombing of abortion clinics is an aberration of Christianity. Hindus and Buddhists have become more and more visible. Of course the God of the Jewish people has always been there because of the Old Testament, which is about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of our Bible.

I hope we've realized that our God is too small. Can we any longer say, in our age of religious pluralism, that God is limited only to Christians? Wikipedia says there are over 4000 known religions. Will openness to acknowledging God in other religious traditions compromise the uniqueness of Christianity? I don't think so.

Dr. Joseph Hough, who recently served as the president of Union Theological Seminary in New York, said: "what is essential for the Christian faith is that we know we have seen the face of God in the face of Jesus Christ. It is not essential to believe that no one else has seen God and experienced redemption in another place or time."

Hough goes on to say: "...all religions are not equal for me. For my faith, Jesus Christ is decisive. But I am a Christian who strongly believes that God has always been and now is working everywhere in every human culture to redeem the world." And then he says this, which ought to be carved in stone over every church door: "Wherever there is peace and movement toward peace, wherever there is justice and movement toward justice, God is present and working." And I would add a hearty "Amen" to that.

Our God is too small. The issues that divide the Body of Christ and seem such big deals to many of us within the churches, simply bore the living daylights out of those on the outside. This is especially true among young adults. Young people demonstrate a deep interest in spiritual issues (witness the big enrollment in college religion courses, and the great interest in so-called "New Age" religious expressions like yoga and meditation). They are the ones who are likely to say, "I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious." But when they say "I'm not religious," what they usually mean is that they have been turned off by the too small god of the institutional church.

The paradox is that while many of these young adults have gotten turned off by the church, at the same time they have frequently gotten turned on by the Bible. And they have discovered that leaping out from every page of God's Holy Word are stirring calls to the service of humanity: calls to love; calls to sacrifice; calls to tolerance and understanding; calls to inclusiveness; calls to a veritable revolution of the Holy Spirit transforming the hearts of those who would like to follow Jesus. And yet, what do they see in the churches? Debates about liturgy; debates about church finances; debates about competing forms of church government; debates about who's in and who's out in the Christian community; debates about who I can love and still be a Christian. And a suffering world cries out to us; "How dare you spend even 10 seconds debating these things while claiming to follow Jesus who said -"Follow me." "A new commandment I give you, that you love others as I have loved you." "Love God and love your neighbor".

Your God is too small. Our God is too small.

Toward the end of his life, Thomas Merton, the Roman Catholic priest and monk, became more and more interested in Eastern religions. He sought points of contact between these great world religions and Christianity. In 1968 he was invited to travel to Asia. On December 10, 1968, in Bangkok, Merton gave a lecture to a group of Christian and non-Christian monks and nuns.

Afterwards, one of the Christian nuns expressed disappointment that Merton hadn't said more about how to evangelize the non-Christians. Merton and another monk were discussing her disappointment as they walked toward their rooms to shower and rest, and Merton turned to the other monk and said, "Let people see how Christ lives in us - that's our missionary task today."

Those are Merton's last known words, because just a few minutes later as he stepped out of the shower he was electrocuted by a faulty electric fan. But those last words are words we can almost hear Jesus saying to us as we face our pluralistic world of today: "Let people see how Christ lives in us - that's our task today."

"Your God is too small."