

The Good News

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The God Wars: 2007

In 2007, God had a bad year. Or so proclaims a full page add in a recent edition of the Book Review section of *The New York Times*. Allegedly God had a bad year at the hands of Richard Dawkins and the success of his screed, *The God Delusion*. Dawkins is an Oxford scientist who asserts that belief in God is irrational and that religion has done great harm in the world.

This was only one of the secular—often aggressively agnostic or atheist—genre of best selling books in 2007:

- Sam Harris' *Letter to a Christian Nation*, is based on the premise that religion is now, and has always been, a serious impediment to science. Anti-scientists continue trying to force public schools to teach our children that their ancient creation myth—a fantastic story for which there is only contradictory evidence—is a good viable alternative to evolution, a well established scientific explanation of human development for which there is a mountain of supporting evidence. These same folks also wish to impede embryonic stem cell research.
- In *God is Not Great*, Christopher Hitchens portrays religion as a malignant force in the world. He approaches religion from a literary standpoint, arguing in favor of frail individuals and denouncing the platitudes and dogmatism of religion.

Considering that these books were best sellers, and that we are living in a materialistic world, does theism have a chance in our society? There are those who would suggest “No.”

One need only look at the September 16 cover of *The Boston Globe's Sunday Magazine*. The setup for the cover story includes the question, “Do You Believe in God?” and the answer, “Nearly one billion people in the world—including a growing number of young Americas—don't.” At Harvard University, there are enough that Greg Epstein has become a humanist chaplain, “who disavows God, preaches to atheists and agnostics, and seeks to build the equivalent of a church for non-believers and others skeptical of or alienated by religion.” In a homily, Chaplain Epstein defined himself: “I have a religious personality, without a scintilla of religious belief. If it's an oxymoron to believe that people who have ceased to believe in God, still need caring and community, then I am proud to be a walking oxymoron.”

A survey published in January 2007 by the Pew Research Center found that 20 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 20 say they have no religious affiliation or consider themselves atheists or agnostics—nearly double those in a similar survey 20 years ago. A follow-up survey in March concluded that “the nation is witnessing a reversal of increased religiosity observed in the mid-1990s” and labels it a generational change.”

No where was the existence of God raised more hauntingly than with the September 2007 release of excerpts from Mother Teresa's diary. According to *Newsweek* magazine, the diaries reveal that “for the last nearly half-century of her life she felt no presence of God whatsoever, neither in her heart or the eucharist.”

Believers assume that just because Mother Teresa didn't perceive God doesn't mean he wasn't there. Atheists disagree. Hitchens, also the author of *The Missionary Position*, a polemic on Mother Teresa proclaims, "She was no more exempt from the realization that religion is a human fabrication than any other person, and that her attempted cure was more and more professions of faith could only have deepened the pit that she had dug for herself."

Perhaps the most balanced assessment of Mother Teresa's trials is that offered by The Reverend James Martin, author of *My Life with the Saints*—a 2003 book that included references to Mother Teresa's doubts—about the new autobiography to be written, based on her diaries:

"[The book will be] a new ministry written for Mother Teresa, a written ministry of her internal life. It may be just as important as her ministry to the poor. It would be a ministry to people who had experienced some doubt, some absence of God in their lives. And you know who that is? Everybody. Atheists, doubters, seekers, believers, everyone."

The media coverage of religion during 2007, a year of religious fanatic, terrorist-driven wars around the globe and one leading up to the (who is playing the religion card?) presidential election, was more nuanced and more contradictory. Christians had their fair share of introspectionists—including many proponents. (This is a topic for a future edition of *The Good News*.)

Peter's recent sermon—Epiphany being the season of manifestation—reminds us that Christian faith and practice are not passive concepts, but something we choose to do and take on. This is clear in all the gospel accounts of the Baptism of Jesus. John's gospel places the connection on the following day. "The next day John the Baptist saw Jesus and said 'Here is the Lamb of God.'" And then the following day John again was standing with two of his disciples and exclaimed when he saw Jesus, "Look, here is the Lamb of God." And we know what happened on the subsequent days as the disciples day by day grew in the Christian life and faith. We learn by participating and following.

What we do defines who we are. We are part of a larger community, just as Chaplain Epstein's followers. In *The Year of Living Biblically*, author and committed secularist writer for *Esquire* magazine A.J. Jacobs describes his attempts to live out scripture by obeying everything he reads. He calls it "one man's humble quest to follow the Bible as literally as possible." Because Jacobs was raised in a non-observant, irreligious household, the book speaks from the humorous vantage point of someone with no religion pretending to be religious. At first he makes light of the creeds and commandments he fumbles with. Nothing makes any sense and everything is completely foreign to him. But by the middle of this quest, there is a shift in his values.

The religious life does not appear so strange. His mood changes from one of detachment and cynicism; he is less sarcastic and more accepting. Could it be that by living the religious life, A. J. Jacobs will be transformed and converted? Jacobs discovers that his actions define him. We are what we do. And the committed secularist writer becomes religious.

There is a famous story of the group of learned rabbis in Auschwitz who gathered on Friday mornings to discuss the existence of God. It is determined after much discussion involving all they had witnessed in Auschwitz that there is no God. There is no way that they could reconcile all they had seen with the belief in God. And after this was concluded, it was sunset and the beginning of the Sabbath. So they all gathered together for evening prayers.

There have been many interpretations of this story. But one is that it is the worshipping community that defines God, and not Auschwitz. We are given meaning by a sense of religious belonging. It is by doing and participating in the baptismal community that we find out faith. Day by day we are strengthened by our actions to live as God would have us live in Christ.

—Tim Green

El Salvador Journal

It has been more than 15 years since the signing of the peace accords that brought a nominal end to the civil war in El Salvador. In a country of more than six million people, more than one million, or 17% of the population, were refugees. At one point San Juan (St. John's) Episcopal Church in El Salvador, which is located on a plot of land smaller than that of St. Mary's, housed over one thousand refugees, and the current rector, Father Luis Serrano, was targeted for assassination.

Although 15 years have passed, the country is still recovering. The infrastructure is poor, especially outside of the cities, and there are limited economic opportunities for the majority of the population. The Episcopal Church in El Salvador is active in its efforts to improve the lot of its members, i.e. the poor in both urban and rural settings. Examples that I saw firsthand on my 11-day trip in June 2007 include:

- Organizing "Artisans for the Lord", a collective that lets urban women at St. John's sell handicrafts at market rates directly to organizations in the U.S. and Canada;
- Providing seed financing for a program of micro-loans for farmers in the rural flatlands to buy fertilizer for their crops; and
- Rebuilding portions of access roads to mountain regions that the local authorities are unable to maintain so that the Diocesan doctor can reach the church's clinic during the rainy season. Last year, a member of one rural mission parish died because his family was unable to get across a river to get him to a hospital

El Salvador is no longer in the public consciousness as it was when I was in college. Yet it will take at least another generation before something that Americans would call a "normal life" comes to the population there. However, the message I heard from the church leadership—from Bishop Barahona, the Primate of Central America, to Father Julio Rivera, rector of our sister parish Santa Maria Virgen—is *not* to send money. They are keen not to create a culture of dependency.

Instead, they have asked us to come and visit, to “walk with them in Christ.” The efforts of mission teams, and the funds they can raise for targeted programs like road building and micro-loans, can and do make a difference in the lives of the people of the Episcopal Church in El Salvador. However what they want most of all is our physical presence there—sharing their lives, hopes, and dreams—carrying this experience to the church family outside of El Salvador.

In this spirit, a group of twelve Episcopalians—six from St. Mary's, and six from St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Natick—will be journeying to El Salvador in May. The team from St. Mary's are Ariel Acuña, Peter Chase, Tim Green, Paul Pyzowski, Tom Riley and Ann Wessel. We will share more details over the coming months as we prepare for our trip. We ask you keep us in your prayers.

Upcoming Events

El Salvadoran Brunch Following the 10:00 a.m. Service and Preceding the Annual Meeting

Please join us and partake of a sumptuous brunch of El Salvadoran and American foods prepared by the members of St. Mary's mission trip. The brunch is a fundraiser, with the goal of defraying a portion of the \$1,500 estimated per person expenses for this trip.

Parish Annual Meeting on Sunday, January 27, 2008

**WARRANT FOR THE ANNUAL MEETING
OF THE PARISH OF ST. MARY'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

The members of the EPISCOPAL SOCIETY OF ST. MARY'S CHURCH IN NEWTON are hereby notified to meet in the Parish Hall of said church in Newton Lower Falls on the 27th day of January, 2008 for the following purposes:

- First:** If necessary, to choose a moderator;
Second: To elect by ballot the following Parish Officers:
Senior Warden
Junior Warden
Clerk
Treasurer
Superintendent of the Churchyard
Also to elect by ballot:
Four members of the Vestry for three years
Two delegates to the Diocesan Convention for one year
Three delegates to the Deanery for one year
One member of the Investment Committee for three
years
Third: To hear and act upon reports of Parish Officers and
Committees;
Fourth: To act upon any other business that may properly come before
the meeting.

Mary Kilmon, Senior Warden
Paul Pyzowski, Junior Warden

Annual Men's and Women's Dinner hosted by the Women of St. Mary's on Friday, February 8
Everyone is invited to join us on Friday February 8th at 6:30 p.m. for an evening of fellowship and wonderful entertainment. Appetizers will be served, followed by a potluck supper in the parish hall. After dinner, *The Fretless Voices*, a wonderful singing group that will entertain us with an eclectic, adventurous mix of classic hits and popular music—certainly something for everyone. A donation of \$10.00 is suggested to defray the cost of the entertainment.

A signup sheet is on the bulletin board in the parish hall along with more information about the event. Please contact dinner hostesses Peggy Scott at peggy37337@aol.com or Kitty Smith at ktts1@comcast.net with any questions.

Women of St. Mary's Lenten Study Series & Sunday Movie Night

The Women of St. Mary's invites you to join them this Lent as we examine various aspects of peace. The discussions will be held each Tuesday morning during Lent at 10 a.m. in the chapter room, starting February 12th and running through to March 11th. The schedule is still be finalized but speakers include:

- Ed Rodman of the Episcopal Divinity School speaking on restorative justice
- Kevin Bowen of the UMass of Boston Joiner Center speaking on the impact of war on people
- Peter Chase speaking on religion and politics and their influence on peace

Please plan to come and bring a friend or two. We are also planning to have another Lenten Sunday night soup and movie program, as we did last year. Details to follow. Please contact Alicia Bowman alicia.bowman@comcast.net with any questions.

Editor: Tim Green