

Is The Sky Falling?

By John Janka

Religion has always been a powerful influence in shaping the values and norms of society. Some would say that religion's powerful influence sometimes causes more problems than it solves. The Christian faith is no exception. Frequently, religion has not only found itself in tension with the culture it has helped to shape, but has also been in turmoil within its own ranks, struggling for the hearts and minds of adherents, subdividing into factions along the fault lines of theology and social philosophy.

Albert Mohler Jr., President of Southern Baptist Seminary and a leading voice for conservative and fundamentalist Christians, recently expressed his sorrow over what he feels is the onset of a post-Christian cultural reality in this country, by which he means that Christians statistically are a declining percentage of the population and their thirty-year influence on the social agenda in this country is beginning to crack. Mohler's "the sky is falling" assessment assumes a narrow definition of "Christian".

The brand of Christianity and the social agenda to which Mohler and others refer as succumbing to dilution by an ever more secular culture is the conservative, evangelical and fundamentalist brand of the Christian tradition. It is this brand that has clung tenaciously to a belief in the inerrancy of scripture and that has remained largely unaffected in this regard by the enlightenment of the nineteenth century. It is this brand that has so dominated the culture generally and shaped the "orthodox" definition of the Christian faith, claiming for itself the centrist position in the perception of American culture. This they have managed no doubt by the sheer numbers of adherents.

It is this brand of Christianity and its belief in the inerrancy of scripture that has given rise to a narrow, exclusive and dogmatic social agenda and contributed to a growing rejection of all expressions of organized Christian faith by a cynical yet spiritually inclined secular culture. A belief in the inerrancy of scripture leads for many to a social agenda that includes abstinence as birth control, capital punishment, creationism over evolution, same sex orientation as sin, and opposition to gun control, gay marriage, stem cell research and abortion, and support for school prayer and a foreign policy based on manifest destiny.

It is this brand of Christian faith that a growing number of college educated, secularists have rejected as lacking credibility in a world they know to be far too complex for any rigid belief system to meaningfully address. This nation was founded on freedom of conscience not the imposition of purity codes. For many, when faith is strangled by reason tethered to proof-texting, it loses credibility and either wounds those searching for love and meaning or drives them to choose from a plethora of alternatives. A more progressive expression of the Christian faith can emerge as one of those alternatives for

the self-described “unaffiliated” and for those refugees from a literal, legalistic and judgmental brand of Christianity.

It is time for the Christian faith to grow up if it is to be a creative, life-affirming spiritual resource that supports the human quest for understanding, reconciliation and the common good. A more progressive expression of the Christian faith recognizes life’s complexities, affirms the search for truth as a life-long process and is committed to behaving the hope for which the human spirit longs.

It is this progressive Christian faith that has been at the forefront of such movements as the abolition of slavery, worker’s rights, suffrage, civil rights, the anti-war movement, the war on poverty, gay equality and the protection of the environment. It is this story that stands along side and is distinctly different from the conservative, evangelical and fundamentalist story of Christianity in this country.

The landscape of Christianity in this culture cannot be painted with a broad brush. Worship styles, spiritual practices and forms of congregational life as well as theological viewpoints are as varied as the architecture of its houses of worship. If the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, one of the most conservative, evangelical-fundamentalist seminaries in the country is announcing the end of Christian America, I say let him speak for himself. It is my perception that Christianity may be on the threshold of evolving, of becoming more vibrant and viable, more intellectually honest and more deeply spiritual, more open to new revelation and less confined by its creeds. The progressive, intellectually curious, diverse, inclusive and deeply spiritual brand of Christianity to which many subscribe may be well positioned to lead this faith evolution revolution.