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Christians benefit from exposure to the wildly diverse world of faith

Bill Tammeus | Apr. 2, 2014 A small c catholic

In my childhood, my hometown of Woodstock, Ill., was a landslide for Protestantism, as I report in my new book, *Woodstock: A Story of Middle Americans [1]*.

Besides us Presbyterians, there were Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians and Baptists galore. (Can you be "galore" in a town of about 7,200 in 1950 and about 22,000 now?)

Yes, there was a substantial Catholic minority who belonged to St. Mary Catholic Church [2] and whose children ultimately attended Marian Central High School [3], which first opened in 1959, the year I was a freshman at the public Woodstock Community High School. But Protestants were everywhere.

I thought a lot about this as I wrote this book, which is about Woodstock in the same way *Catch-22* is about airplanes. The point of the book, rather than being a memoir or a travelogue, is to help readers understand what those of us I call Middle Americans brought to the U.S. in the wake of the so-called Greatest Generation. So the personal, Woodstock-based anecdotes in the book expand to more universal truths. At least I hope so.

In a chapter called "Faith," I note, "In fact, the whole religious landscape of the United States is different today. No doubt Woodstock still is predominantly Protestant, but Protestants no longer make up a majority of Americans, having slipped just below the fifty percent level in the latest surveys."

Then I get to the point I will expand on a bit here: "We Middle Americans have adapted to all of this, but some not nearly as well as others. While some of us have been active in interfaith groups that promote religious harmony and understanding, others have bought into fear and have promoted prejudices that have acquired such labels as Islamophobia and antisemitism. And almost across the board there has been biblical and theological illiteracy that is astonishing in its breadth and depth."

That's not a bad description of much of the Christian portion of our population, whether Catholic or Protestant.

What has caused such prejudice and ignorance to exist? Several factors.

- In Protestantism, the fundamentalist branch has insisted on a literal reading of the Bible even though taking Scripture seriously requires a metaphorical sensitivity and imagination. That same branch of the church sometimes has fostered xenophobic attitudes that reject the immigrants who have come since Lyndon Johnson signed immigration reform into law in 1965 -- immigrants who brought their religions with them.
- By contrast, the progressive branch of Protestantism often seems to have preached a mushy Gospel, one that Princeton Theological Seminary scholar Kenda Creasy Dean [4] has called "moralistic therapeutic deism," which essentially calls on people just to be nice and requires little learning.
- Catholics, meanwhile, at least until recently, seem to have done little to promote Bible literacy. Almost every Catholic I know over age 40 has told me Bible reading was not only not insisted upon; it was sometimes actively discouraged.

- In addition, of course, we must remember the countless ways Christianity adopted anti-Jewish stances [5] for century after century, leading to a widespread acceptance of religious prejudice.

When you join all of that to the widespread reaction of anxiety and blame that the 9/11 terrorist attacks produced, you begin to see how we Americans have ended up mired in theological and biblical ignorance and in religious bigotry.

Now, clearly this isn't true of all of us, but as I thought about my own journey from an almost-all-white, almost-all-Christian town in northern Illinois to my many interfaith and interracial connections today, I came to wish others had some of the experiences I've had -- of living two years of my childhood in India, of learning about many faiths so I could write about them, of an extended family that includes people of Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Chinese and African heritage.

Shut off from exposure to the wildly diverse world of faith, we grow insular and even dangerous. Our faith demands better.

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