EDITORIAL


or many people the most troubling thing about Christianity is some deep philosophical problem. We can live peaceably with impenetrable philosophical puzzles. What troubles us is something more concrete; the behavior of many people who count themselves as disciples of the one who taught, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," and even "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

Every religion is plagued by those who exploit it for their own purposes or embarrass and defame it by their behavior. Thus every skeptic, and indeed every believer, can point to those whose lives suggest that religion is a sham -- those who profess the love of Christ and practice hate, who preach honesty and fail to report all their income, who proclaim the unity of the church and attack people whose doctrinal views differ from their own, who promote selflessness and are vain to the core, who pretend concern and couldn't care less. As this is being written, the newsmagazine covers picture a television evangelist who admits an adulterous affair and, worse, to having used his million-dollar-plus income for luxurious mansions with gold-plated fixtures. By the time you read this, the

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REFERENDUM (Part II): DISCLOSURE AND THE FIGHTER OF FAITH/ SKY VIEW

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phenomenon will have been reenacted with fresh examples. As Madeline L'Engle lamented, "Christians have given Christianity a bad name."

But then again, every religion can also point to those who exemplify its aspirations and whose lives inspire others to join them in their pilgrimage. Christianity, too, can point to its Martin Luther Kings and Mother Theresas, its Albert Schweitzers and Desmond Tutus, its contribution to the spread of hospitals and universities and to the abolition of slavery.

The vivid examples -- the worst and the best -- capture our attention but do not decide the issue: do self-professed Christians, more than others, tend to display the fruits of the Spirit, or their opposites? Is the Christian religion more a source of compassion or intolerance? The extremes -- the church-going civil rights activists and the church-going Ku Klux Klan -- cancel each other out. So it remains for dispassionate research with ordinary people to help us decide the issue.

In some respects, the links between religion and moral behavior are clear. Self-described Christians in the Western world engage in much less sexual promiscuity, much less drug and alcohol abuse, and much less violent crime and delinquent behavior. Because religion-morality links are correlational, the direction of cause and effect is sometimes ambiguous. Nevertheless, such findings hint that when the church is clear and forceful in its ethical prescriptions, it may be influential.

Many additional -- and more perplexing -- studies have accumulated on the links between religion and altruism and between religion and prejudice. Most studies of altruistic behavior have observed people's willingness to help in minor emergencies -- to mail an addressed lost letter found on the sidewalk, to call the garage for a stranded motorist who just spent her only quarter on a wrong number, to aid someone in an adjacent room who was heard to fall off a ladder. Researcher Daniel Batson has reviewed the available research, and his conclusion would not have pleased the apostle Paul: There is no evidence that (highly religious people) are any more likely than the less religious to help someone in need.
The more religious may see themselves as more helpful and caring; they may even be seen this way by others. But when it comes to action, there is no evidence that they are more helpful.

At first blush, there is even more cause for alarm in the findings of the religion-prejudice studies. American church members have tended to be more racially prejudiced than nonmembers, and those professing traditional Christian beliefs have expressed more racial prejudice than those with less traditional beliefs. Perhaps it shouldn't shock us, for throughout history religion has provided convenient excuses -- indeed powerful justifications -- for all sorts of cruelty. For the horrors of military crusades. For the dehumanization of slavery and apartheid. For the subordination of women. The beautiful medieval town of St. Andrews, where these words are being written, was the ecclesiastical center of early Protestantism in Scotland. In the year 1643 alone -- the midpoint of a 150-year reign of terror in St. Andrews and its environs -- forty terrified women were judged by church elders to be witches and consigned to torture and death. These women and the St. Andrews martyrs who preceded them at the time of Reformation remind us that behind religious fanaticism evil sometimes lurks. Jesus therefore reserved some of his strongest condemnation for the self-righteous religious folk of his day. From His time to ours, "not everyone who says ... 'Lord, Lord,'" speaks for God. As Pascal lamented, "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction."

These things are true, but they are not the whole truth about the consequences of religion. Studies of more long-term altruism, though fewer in number, hint that self-described Christians tend to be more self-giving -- more likely to give away significant amounts of money and more likely to have devoted many hours during the preceding year in volunteer activities. For example, among the 12 percent of Americans whom George Gallup in 1984 classified as "highly spiritually committed," 46 percent said they were presently working among the poor, the infirm, or the elderly -- many more than among those less committed.

In the realm of prejudice, religion's role seems paradoxical. As psychologist Gordon Allport noted three decades ago, "It makes prejudice and it unmakes prejudice." The unmaking of prejudice is suggested first by studies of church members; in nearly every one of more than two dozen studies, faithful church attenders exhibited less prejudice than irregular attenders. Second, those for whom religion is an end in itself (who agree, for example, with the statement "My religious beliefs are what really lie behind my whole approach to life") typically express less racial prejudice than those for whom religion is more a means to other ends (for example, who agree that "A primary reason for my interest in religion is that my church is a congenial social activity"). Third, ministers and priests -- who presumably are more religiously committed and motivated than most people -- have also generally been more supportive of civil rights efforts than have their own laypeople. So it seems that among the churched the devout exhibit less prejudice and deeper feelings of human brotherhood and sisterhood than the nominally religious, who are somewhat more likely to rationalize prejudice with the aid of religion. "We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another," lamented the eighteenth-century satirist Jonathan Swift.

What, then, might be our response to bigots and their bigotry? Hate the sin and love the sinner. Hate the bigotry and love the bigot. Be intolerant of intolerance, despise lovelessness, detest injustice, and remember: "The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentle-
ness, self-control."

Second, take heart from those heroes of the faith who exemplify such fruit. If we are most troubled by the smallmindedness of those whose lives seem to deny the good news message of love, peace, and reconciliation, we are also most encouraged by those whose lives witness to the power of deep faith.

One such person was the serene, unpretentious, soft-spoken Eric Liddell, who, thanks to the Oscar-winning movie Chariots of Fire is known to the world as a man who was exceptionally committed to his principles. Rather than run on Sunday, he gave up his chance for a likely Olympic gold medal in the hundred meters, suffered the insult of being called a traitor to his country for doing so, and then astonished everyone by instead running and winning the four hundred-meter race in world record time. Although Liddell returned home a national hero, his greater heroism began where the movie ends. Shunning fame, fortune, and the next Olympic games, he slipped out of the limelight to become a missionary to China, where he taught chemistry and English and later worked in rugged conditions among rural, peasant people amidst suffering death triggered by Japan's invasion of China during the late 1930's.

By all accounts, Liddell unfailingly radiated good humor and kindness, and because of his smiling good nature was often a peacemaker in times of conflict among the peasants and between them and their invaders. Nor was he one to pass by on the other side of the road when someone was suffering or in the need of a daring rescue effort. When, shortly before Japan entered World War II, his pregnant wife and two daughters left China for the safety of home, Liddell stayed behind to minister, and in 1943 he was rounded up along with 1800 other foreigners into a Japanese internment camp in the Shantung Province of North China. In Langdon Gilkey's 1966 book The Shantung Compound: The Story of Men and Women Under Pressure, Gilkey recalls the conflicts and selfishness that predominated among this assortment of businesspeople, missionaries, doctors, professors, junkies, and prostitutes, all crammed into a former mission station no longer than two football fields and not as wide. Subjected to privation but not
torture, malnutrition but not starvation, the "fundamental bent of the total self in all of us was inward, toward our own welfare," observed Gilkey. "And so immersed were we in it that we hardly seemed able to see this in ourselves."

During his two years in the camp, Eric Liddell emerged as its "most outstanding personality," as another book on the Shantung Compound later described him -- the one "with a permanent smile." It was he who organized games and worship, taught science to the children, and cared for people of every sort. One Russian prostitute, for whom he put up some shelves, said he was the only man who did anything for her without wanting to be repaid.

In all accounts, Liddell emerges as a sort of contemporary Christ figure, a man whose life was empowered by the hour of prayer, Bible reading, and meditation with which he began each day before the others were awake; a man who according to his closest comrade was "literally, God-controlled, in his thought, judgement, actions, words"; a man who befriended despised prostitutes and business people and bridged the gulf between them and the missionaries; a man who could be seen carrying coal for an old person; a man who offered to sell his Olympic gold watch to buy more sports gear for the children; a man who, weakened by privation and hunger, began quietly to suffer headaches and discouragement, the early signs of a brain disease that, before many even realized he was seriously ill, took his life just months before the camp's liberation. As he lay in the arms of a friend, nurse Annie Buchan, he spoke his last words, "Annie, it's complete surrender," then convulsed, vomited all over her, lapsed into a coma, and died within hours. Scotland mourned its lost hero, the one in whom the fruits of the Spirit were so clearly displayed: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Again, what troubles us most about Christianity is not so much the philosophical genius of great Christian thinkers as it is the witness of unpretentious lives empowered by faith -- of the Eric Liddells and of those individuals known to each one of us who in their own ways testify to the peace and love that can flow from lives touched by grace. It is people such as these who encourage us in times of uncertainty, discouragement, and self-pity to keep on -- to fight the fight, to finish the race, to keep the faith.


DOGS WHO KNOW THE LORD