

What does the 'comeback' of religion mean for us? [article in *Candour* issue 09, October 2010]

'God is Back' is the title of a new book by John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge: its subtitle is 'How the global revival of faith is changing the world'. These authors are not being ironic: religion *is* back on our radar today in a way we could never have imagined a generation ago. In the 1960s, commentators were confidently predicting the end of religion: now, to quote one of them, distinguished US sociologist Peter Berger, the world is as 'furiously religious' as it ever was! It's not so much that there are more believers now than before, but that religion is again a force to reckon with. Statistics show that coverage of 'religious' stories in the Western media has increased enormously in the last decade. Leaders of governments now need to know about the major faith traditions in order to understand the dynamic behind world events and the nature of their own societies. Some of these leaders even have a religious faith themselves and speak publicly about its influence on them. Perhaps it is no surprise that religion is now under greater attack than it has been for years: why would Dawkins and Hitchens devote so much time to rubbishing belief in God if God were not making a come-back?

Partly this 'come-back' has been triggered by developments casting religion in a negative light, like 9/11 and the bombings in Madrid, London, Bali and elsewhere. Although virtually all religious people, like everybody else, would not hesitate to condemn these atrocities, casual usage in the media of terms like 'Muslim fundamentalism' and 'militant Islam' has served to confirm suspicions that religion is often dangerous and destructive. Religion is not well understood by commentators and opinion formers – its re-emergence has caught many by surprise and struggling for the grammar to explain it – but there's a widespread perception that it has little to contribute to the public good and is best kept to the 'private sphere'.

This is a huge challenge to us in the Christian church. How do people see us and our faith today? What sort of 'public face' does Christianity have at present? How well are our beliefs and practices understood? What would the average New Zealander say if asked what purpose they thought the churches in their town were serving? Because, let's face it, it's not just Islam that it is let down by a small number of people on its extremes, that gets a bad name because of the actions of the few. Christianity has also had a pretty dreadful press of late, which has seriously affected how people see all of us who embrace that label. We don't need to dwell on all the gory details, but even if we limit ourselves to events of the last few weeks – the uncovering of horrendous levels of child abuse in the Roman Catholic church, and the virulent attacks on Islam in the form of opposition to the building of a mosque and cultural centre near Ground Zero and threats to burn the Qur'an – we see much of which to be ashamed. How do we react?

It's a truism, of course, that 'bad news' stories are generally the only stories that get reported. A church can get on with serving its community faithfully for generations and never get a mention in the local paper, but if one of its leaders starts fiddling the books or gets caught driving over the limit, that will be headline news! So it is on the larger stage: serious journalists will say that the two kinds of people they generally find in the most deprived and abandoned areas of the world are evangelical Christians and Catholic nuns, yet it's the members of these traditions who cause scandal who make the news, not those quietly getting on with being the hands and feet of Christ to the poor.

While, in the days leading up to the anniversary of 9/11, the world's media chose to focus on the obscure pastor of an obscure church and his threat to burn copies of the holy book of Islam, many other Christians in the USA were getting on with just being good neighbours to Muslims in their town and discovering how church and mosque could work together to serve the local community. Even in that pastor's town some 2,000 Christians came together, on the eve of 9/11, for a 'gathering for peace, understanding and hope' – but that didn't cause quite the same international stir!

On his visit to New Zealand last month, US church leader Jim Wallis suggested it is largely those on the 'extremes' who set the news agenda today, whether in the caves of Afghanistan or in tiny fundamentalist churches in Florida. He mentioned how this can lead to distorted perceptions of reality – for example, that Christian antipathy to Islam is increasing – but also how pressure on the media to report stories which would give a more *balanced* perspective can reap results. On one level we can hardly blame the media for devouring wacky religious stories when religious people feed them to them, but we also have a responsibility to promote the truth and ensure that people do not mistake distorted or false representations of the gospel for the 'real thing'.

The unreported truth is that followers of Jesus are a massive force for good in the world. In towns, villages and neighbourhoods around the country, churches faithfully serve the spiritual and material needs of those around them, often largely unsung. At the national and global level, Christians, along with people of all faiths and none, are making a massive difference to the big issues of our day – including poverty, unfair trade, climate change and sex trafficking – through their committed, selfless action. At the end of the day we do it because it is what God calls us to do and because it is right, not in the hope of approbation from the world; and we accept that there will always be those offended by the gospel, just as people were by Jesus himself. But we are called to be wise as serpents (Matt 10.16), and in our media-driven culture I think that means not passively allowing others to determine how people perceive us, but showing as best we can the difference our message can make to individuals, communities and the world at large.