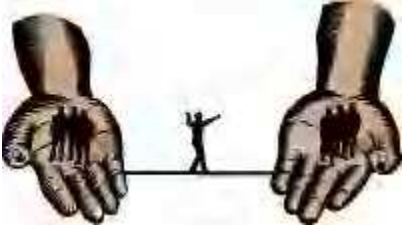


■ Columnists' opinions

Monday: On Religion

Illuminating the national conversation



A passion for moderation

The polar ends of the religious spectrum — atheists on one hand, fundamentalists on the other — often eclipse the believers in the middle. Yet the faithful middle provides a compassionate and constructive form of faith that has much to offer our fractured world.

By Tom Krattenmaker

These are not the brightest times for religious moderates. Mainstream Episcopalians, Methodists, Catholics and the like, they're being upstaged by the more aggressive actors at the polar ends of the spectrum. From Christian conservatives flies rhetoric that pays little heed to the inclusiveness, reasonable tones and subtlety of the ecumenical middle. And from anti-religion author Sam Harris and like-minded atheists comes the damning suggestion that moderates enable violent fundamentalism and that moderation, [as Harris puts it](#), "is the result of not taking Scripture all that seriously."

(Illustration by Adrienne Lewis, USA TODAY)

If any conclusions can be drawn from my recent conversations with the voice of religious moderation here in Oregon, those in the measured middle are going to be heard from more in the days ahead. And they take their Scripture *very* seriously.

Carla Starrett-Bigg, outreach director for Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, exhibits nothing short of a passion when she describes the need for religion to put forward its moderate, thoughtful face, and how her group is striving to do just that.

Especially here in the more-secular-than-thou Pacific Northwest, to reveal your religiosity is sometimes to subject yourself to some harsh stereotypes, Starrett-Bigg points out. She likens it to going to Europe and revealing you're an American. "They'll say, 'You don't seem like an American. You're not fat. You don't carry a gun.' That's how it can be for Christians now. People assume you hate gay people or that you're just like Jerry Falwell."

Because of their good manners, the moderates' voice has been relatively quiet, and their message has had a harder time breaking through. Unity? Inter-religious understanding? Peace? In a time of over-heated rhetoric from the extreme-opposite camps, it's almost as though these are things for wimps.

Faithful to the word

The imperative for respect and bridging differences indeed does lead to a soft-pedaling of some hot-button issues, but that hardly equates with lukewarm faith. In truth, moderation is biblical to the core. The

moderates' emphasis on unity and inclusion is not politically correct softness, but a conviction they draw straight from the words and deeds of Jesus.

"People sometimes confuse moderation with not taking a strong stance of belief," says Jan Elfers, director of congregational relations and peace programs for the Oregon group, as she lays out the New Testament case for moderation. "We hold our beliefs very deeply, and that means loving our neighbors like ourselves."

Of course, the scriptural foundation for moderation might not impress secularists and atheists, who by definition don't put stock in the Bible. But shouldn't the stance of these moderates at least give pause to those who condemn faith as a "dangerous delusion"?

That, of course, is precisely how religion is being tagged by Harris and an increasingly vocal legion of religion-fighters. Through popular books by Harris and Richard Dawkins, [the documentary *The God Who Wasn't There*](#), and [the Internet-based "Blasphemy Challenge"](#), the atheist vanguard is pushing back against the excesses of conservative religion with the same no-prisoners ferocity that has characterized the Christian right.

The Blasphemy Challenge might be the most provocative of these challenges. Organizers have mounted dozens and dozens of short film clips featuring mostly young people committing what some regard as the ultimate sin: renouncing the Holy Spirit. The clip that has attracted the most media attention comes from a "Joel" who says, "I deny the Holy Spirit, as well as God, Jesus, Buddha, Zeus, Mohammed, Joseph Smith, Sponge Bob, the Pope, Santa Clause, Mother Mary, the Easter Bunny, the tooth fairy, Optimus Prime, all the saints and Spiderman."

Although evangelical Christians take the brunt of the atheists' criticism, Harris and company don't stop there. Harris, author of the book *The End of Faith*, [derides moderates, too](#), for their "elaborate exercise in self-deception" and their apparent tolerance of violent fundamentalism. Brian Flemming takes moderate-bashing a step further in his film *The God Who Wasn't There*. "What the hell is moderate Christianity?" asks the former evangelical in his narration. "Jesus was only *sort of* the son of God? He only *somewhat* rose from the dead? Your eternal soul is at stake but you shouldn't make a big deal out of it? Moderate Christianity makes no sense. Is it any wonder so many people choose the Christian leaders who actually have the courage of their convictions?" That final sentence is delivered over a close-up photo of a deranged-looking Pat Robertson.

'Excesses of fundamentalism'

No doubt, the high-profile atheists have a legitimate point when they detail the destructive excesses of fundamentalism. Whether it's the conservative Roman Catholic group Opus Dei and its practice of self-mortification, evangelicals Christians who invoke martial language in their call to "reclaim America for Christ," or fundamentalist Muslims who legitimize violence in the name of Allah, a tide of harsh, divisive faith seems to be rising around the world.

But let's not throw out the baby with the tainted bath water. Flemming's polemics bespeak an almost intentional misunderstanding of moderate belief. It's not that moderates don't "make a big deal" out of their faith. It's that they bring to it a laudable measure of nuance, humility and thoughtfulness. What the moderate-bashers fail to acknowledge — and they must know better — is that there are other, non-literal ways to conceive of the divine and apply it to life, ways that might actually do some good in our fractured society.

Maybe it's true that moderates ought to push harder against fundamentalism. But how else moderation is to blame for the violent excesses of religion hasn't been convincingly explained. Caring for the environment, fighting poverty, advocating for peace — these are part of religion's "dangerous delusion"? More likely, they are a path — probably a crucial path — to something better.

As for delusions, Harris perhaps harbors one when he makes the contention that an end to religion is the prescription for society's ills. An end to religion? That, you can be sure, is not happening anytime soon. Given the obvious reality, who better to challenge "bad" religion than those who practice constructive, healing religion — the moderates?

The middle might not be in vogue these days, but those occupying the sensible religious center could be just the ones we need. Discredit moderation? I think we should encourage it. With a passion.

Tom Krattenmaker, who lives in Portland, Ore., specializes in religion in public life and is a member of USA TODAY's board of contributors. He is working on a book about the Christianizing of professional sports.

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