

*Wednesday June 27, 2012*

## **Labels, labels, labels...**

By Jim Taylor

The mail brought me two more packages of address labels. Free. From various well-meaning charities. Who expect that a grateful recipient will respond by making a donation to their cause.

I already have an excess of labels. They fill a two-inch wide slot in an organizer on my desk. A rough count suggests that I currently have about 2,200 unused labels.

What misguided marketing genius decided that everyone wants address labels for a technologically obsolete means of delivering a message, anyway? Especially in a computer age. If I choose to use the postal system, a few keystrokes will tell my computer to print a return address on the envelope. If I choose not to use the postal system, another few keystrokes will send my message instantly as e-mail.

### **Label it, ignore it**

The more I think about labels, the more they bug me. Sure, they're a means of marking MY mail, MY possessions. But they're also a way of defining what's NOT mine.

As soon as I slap the label "fundamentalist" onto someone I disagree with, I don't have to listen to him any longer.

When one of our elected representatives makes a thoughtful suggestion, asks a valid question – yes, it does happen occasionally! -- it's immediately labeled according to that person's political and economic ties. Then it can be safely ignored. We already know what it's about.

I recall a conference organized to oppose a mining project.

"Shouldn't we ask the company about these issues?" someone asked.

"Why bother?" came the retort. "We already know what they're going to say."

In any controversy, derogatory labels tend to fly around like autumn leaves. Environmental activists get labeled "tree-huggers." Or even "eco-terrorists." They, in turn, fire labels at the other side – resource rapers, free marketeers, Friedmanites, one-per-centers....

### **Watertight compartments**

Thus we set up compartments. Between ourselves. And within ourselves. This is business, that's family. This is secular, that's religious...

There are some secular songs we never sing in church, even though they may express hope, faith, love, and compassion far better than a 17<sup>th</sup> century hymn. But they're labeled pop, not church.

Theoretically, religious faith should influence all of life. But people who affirm "Thou shalt not kill" on Sunday go to work on Monday building missiles or selling cigarettes. They would never swear in church, but they don't hesitate to use the name of the Lord as an expletive at the worksite or the boardroom.

They live in compartments that don't connect.

And sometimes, as a result, they walk away from the compartment that doesn't fit. They seal it up, and never risk opening it again.

I wish we could do without the labels that let us divide our lives into watertight compartments. Instead of treating science as an enemy of theology, I wish we could let it inform and influence our faith. I wish we would let studies in psychology and literature help us understand our religious texts better.

Regardless of what religious tradition we happen to profess.

Perhaps I'll make a symbolic start by throwing out any more labels sent to me by charitable organizations.

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## YOUR TURN

Steve Roney agreed with most of my last column, about the “foreignness” of other world religions. “My original academic specialty was comparative religions. I agree with what I think you are saying here.

“For what it's worth, here's my premise: God exists, God is good, God loves us all. It follows that he is not going to reveal the means of salvation arbitrarily only to a certain portion of mankind. It follows that at least all major religious traditions must be essentially true and offer workable paths to salvation.

“Why are there many religions instead of just one? Because there are many cultures, with different shared concepts, symbols, and allusions. The words and images that would work best to convey a very profound insight to a Greek are not going to convey the same thing to a Chinese, because they are approaching it with widely different preconceptions. Like any good writer, God is acutely conscious of his audience.

“Because of this, I think that religious conversion is in principle a bad idea. Someone raised in a Christian context in North America is going to have a lot more trouble getting the essence of Buddhism than he is getting the essence of Christianity. I have seen a lot of very weird North American takes on Buddhism, in my opinion.

“This does not mean all religions are equally true, only that they are all sufficient, if genuinely followed.”

Steve did question my assumptions about European-culture Christianity: “Buddhism and Confucianism are the two faiths I would see as the most rationalist... And I'd say both Judaism and Islam are more wedded to “The Book” than Christianity. Protestantism does tend to be more focused on the written word than Catholicism....Of course, other traditions also have their written texts, and consider them definitive. Accepting the Vedas is basically the only thing that is definitive of Hinduism. The Buddhists actually invented printing, and they invented it specifically to print and preserve their sutras. I agree that printing first became widespread in Western culture, and that had massive effects. But that does not explain Western culture—there is a deeper question. Given that printing was invented in China and Korea, not in the West, and was also known in the Muslim world, why was it adopted wholesale in the West, long before it was in the East or in the Muslim world?”

Heather McClure lives in Montreal, probably Canada's most multi-cultural city. “In an ever shrinking world, the issue of cultural filters/bias in religion is more and more evident and challenging. Living in a city that has as many mosques, temples, synagogues and churches, I see and hear the differences daily, but if we can get over our need as Christians to be ‘The Religion’ then we can discover the rich variety of faithful spiritual expressions that exist to feed the world.

“If you have not already read/heard of it, I recommend a book called ‘Acts of Faith’ by Eboo Patel. It is an excellent commentary on interfaith dialogue -- a quick and easy read, but in no way fluffy!”

Jim Henderschedt wrote, “How refreshing to find someone else who is open to discovering the good parts of other traditions. I would only add one more tradition to which I find an attraction, and that is Buddhism for its very simple way of determining moral behavior. And, yes, Paul did change the complexion of Christianity. A rabbi observed to me recently that had it not been for Paul we would probably be a Jewish sect today.”

And this from Isabel Gibson: “It is rare that we can stand outside our selves - to stand outside our culture is a neat feat indeed. This is a nice companion piece to your one on the different value sets of progressives and conservatives -- we take the way we think/feel for granted.”

Unfortunately, I neglected to ask Isabel which column she meant – it could have been any one of a dozen or more.

Christine Way Skinner said that the column reminded her of Elie Wiesel's story about the rabbi who no longer knew how to light the fire, how to say the prayer, or even where to go in the forest. But he still knew the story, and that was sufficient.

In a subsequent note Christine added wryly, "Every time I think of Wiesel, I regret the fact that when I was attending Harvard Divinity School I had the chance to take a course with him and did not. I had read a couple of his books and figured that I didn't need to take his course. The folly of youth!"

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## PSALM PARAPHRASES

A woman once described her bout with depression a deep black pit with shiny walls, too smooth for her to climb. It seemed like an appropriate metaphor for Psalm 130, this Sunday's suggested reading.

1 From the bottom of a deep black pit, God, I scream at you.

2 The walls rise above my head, shutting out the light.

Can you hear me, God?

I can't get out by my own efforts.

3 I've tried and tried. I climb part way out,

and then I slide back again to the bottom.

Without your help, I'm sunk forever.

4 Don't judge me -- forgive me!

Free me from my inner faults.

Give me another chance!

5 I shall bed down in the pit and wait for you.

6 Like parents staying up until a teenager comes home,

like a puppy poised for its master's footstep,

I wait for your response.

I know I will not be disappointed.

7 Put your hope in the Lord.

You will not be disappointed either.

8 God can free us from our failures,

and save us from our successes.

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## YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, [www.seemslikegod.org](http://www.seemslikegod.org);
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com](mailto:isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write [alvawood@gmail.com](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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## TECHNICAL STUFF

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