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Selling Everything But Religion

Ken Briggs | May. 9, 2011 NCR Today

The other day a man fired a shotgun from his house at two Jehovah Witness women who had knocked on his door presumably to ask him if he knew where he would spend eternity.

According to local news reports, the man and his wife had shouted "This is a Catholic home" in an effort to chase the women away and the man fired four rounds into the front lawn when they didn't move fast enough to suit him.

JWs are stereotypical religious nuisances, the butt of jokes and the objects of scorn. Whatever the details of the local confrontation, they had doubtless annoyed the small town couple with the persistent, dauntless approach that has marked their mission for many years and riled up so many neighborhoods.

But to many people in this area, firing live ammunition crosses the line and reminds me why I feel a degree of protectiveness toward JWs in addition to the fact that they've practiced racial and ethnical mixing to a remarkable degree and that they wisely limit the size of congregations to retain familiarity and effectiveness.

Historically, the Witnesses, just a century or so old, only fed off an energetic evangelism that had long been deeply embedded in the country. Peddling religion was on the agenda from the start and, to a considerable degree, still is. Flip the cable channels for a sampling.

The drive to convert souls was in my view the chief engine that drove the growth and profit mentality of capitalism. We are a nation of sales personnel urging everyone to buy everything, thanks in large measure to the same compulsion that sent religious orders to win Indian tribes to Christ.

Few complain at the sales pitches that come from every direction, importuning us to part company with our dollars for all sorts of products that don't remotely touch matters of the soul. So why do we scoff so loudly at those who actually believe they bring a balm from Gilead that can cure the sin sick soul? There's no need to agree with the message, but why do more of us act so affronted by those who risk life and limb to deliver a message to which they, unlike the merchants who know their products are frauds, are actually committed?

It is to our credit that we exhibit more religious tolerance these days, but I suspect that much of it is because we hold no firm convictions and wouldn't have the faintest idea if we'd recommend any article of faith to anybody. The decline of coercion as an instrument of religious indoctrination is something to cheer, but in its place we've grown more suspicious of genuine believers who might have the audacity to think that they have received the benefit of "truths" they're eager to pass along out of concern for others.

In a country whose proselytizing energies were evident from the start, there is still a fair amount of revivalism, but the practitioners have become more marginalized. In mainstream America, advocating religious remedies has become nearly taboo particularly in urban, self-described, sophisticated centers, places where personal faith dares not speak its name.

It's been said that the one thing that intellectuals cannot tolerate is an absolutist.

Jehovah Witnesses run into variations of that response all the time but in the big marketplace where materialism prevails they have every right to call upon the citizenry to mend their ways as the end of the world nears.

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