

What the world needs now

by Lloyd Robertson

The story is told about two men from Northern Ireland, Jock and Andrew. Now, Jock was a Protestant while Andrew was Roman Catholic; and, because they were on different sides, they came to blows. After a while, Jock discovered he was getting the worst of it and, tiring quickly, said to Andrew "Andy, please, let's take a breather". Andrew agreed. While they sat, catching their breath, Jock said, "Now wouldn't it be wonderful if we was both atheists so that we could live in peace and harmony like Christians".

A few weeks ago Jackie Messer revealed how a group of fundamentalist Christians invaded her front lawn because they did not like some of the books she sold in her bookstore. They made a public demonstration that included praying because, in their opinion, Jackie's store is "cultish".

I am reminded of the religious intolerance shown in conflicts like Bosnia, India and Pakistan, the Middle East and Northern Ireland. In each case the other side in the religious conflict is pictured as evil or as working for the "forces of evil".

I am reminded of the demonstrations against clinics that perform abortions across North America. The priests and ministers say that they want the demonstrations to be peaceful. But every once in a while a doctor is shot.

A few years ago I was a guest panellist at the Canadian Bible College in Regina. The theme was the future of public education. I told the assembled students that we needed a school system that treasured the racial, cultural and religious diversity that make up an increasingly multicultural Canada. I said that no religious belief system should be favored by our public education system.

They lined up at the microphones, these future ministers and wives of ministers. They told me I was working for Satan. They accused me, as an elected school board member, of leading a whole generation of school children to "eternal damnation". The vehemence was such that I began to fear for my safety.

In my last column I recounted the hatred two individuals felt toward Jews. Is that hatred racial or is it religious? Or is there a real difference?

In his classic work *Escape From Freedom*, pioneering psychologist Eric Fromm examined the mind of the authoritarian or fundamentalist personality. He concluded that a large segment of both U.S.A. and German populations were afraid of the responsibilities that come with freedom.

Freedom means choices and the stress of knowing that you may make wrong choices. He noted in that in times of great political, social or economic upheaval people face this greater freedom of individuation without the security of their old institutions. They then retreat from freedom by joining authoritarian political or religious movements. They are then spared the need to make many choices, the future is seen to be assured and the individual is made to feel that he or she is part of a greater community of believers.

The problem with sublimating one's self to a higher authority is that issues are no longer open for debate. One accepts, unquestioningly, the dictates that are viewed as "fundamental" or one is demonized. Absolute and unquestioning obedience is demanded.

Not all religions give themselves to this fundamentalist personality. Altho I am not a member of the United Church and know nothing of its internal workings I have been impressed with recent United Church moderators. They have campaigned against racism, sexism, religious bigotry and homophobia even within their own church and they have done this without describing those that disagree as "evil".

The point is that Jock and Andrew don't have to give up Christianity in order to live in peace and harmony with each other. But they do have to give up their fundamentalist viewpoint. The other person is not evil. He is not a threat and is not poisoning the minds of children. The other person is certainly right about a lot of things. No one has all the answers.

It is not good enough that Jock and Andrew learn tolerance. We tolerate people that we basically can't stand. Jock and Andrew must learn to cherish each other, even to their differences. They can accomplish this by recognizing their common humanity. All humans have the same basic needs, fears and drives. We can walk together, not apart.