

FORGET THE ANSWERS; IT'S THE QUESTIONS THAT COUNT

Joan Chittister

RBTE, JUNE 2010

On the way out here it occurred to me that very thought of a gathering of religious publishers and booksellers these days might well be enough to send the entire Christian Church into a kind of dogmatic apoplexy.

If Gutenberg was a problem for the establishment, you have got to be the equivalent of a theological big bang, a moral tsunami, an ecclesiastical hurricane watch of enormous proportions.

Why? Because what you do in this century—what you publish, what you sell—counts in every crack and corner of the human race.

The ideas you release into the spiritual atmosphere shape the intellectual clay that will take us from one world—nationalistic, parochial, silent and submissive—to one that is interconnected, pluralistic, global, scientific, irreverent—and fundamentalist as well as educated, evolutionist and more and more independent-minded every day.

This is clearly a world that must be trod on careful feet.

In the course of trying to deal with all of that and its implications for writers, as well as publishers and book sellers these past years I came across a couple stories that point, I think, to just how volatile, dangerous, intriguing and creative this excursion into complex and contrary questions can really be—even in a spiritual arena:

In the first story, the police stop a car that has just crossed a traffic counter on a major highway.

Leaning into the driver's window the trooper says, "Sir, you are the first person in a thousand cars to cross this counter with your seat belt on.

For that act of civic responsibility, the department wants to make you an example for the rest of society so we are rewarding you with a check for \$5000.

"What," the trooper asks as he pushes the check through the driver's window, are you going to do with all this money."

"Well," the driver says, "I suppose the first thing I oughta do is buy myself a license."

Just as the cop steps back the woman in the passenger seat reaches across the driver and says, "Don't pay any attention to him, officer. He's always a smart mouth when he's drunk."

Then the guy from the back seat says, "I told you two we wouldn't get very far in a stolen car."

And finally a voice is heard from the trunk saying, "Hey, buddy, are we over the border yet?"

I got the point: learning to ask the right questions is the key to a meaningful life.

The second thing I read on the subject was a proverb that taught:

If you really expect to find the answer to your problem, you simply haven't asked a big enough question.

Point: Only the big questions are really worth spending a life on.

And finally, I heard a Sufi story about a Holy One who sends his disciples to the tailor to get a new galibea for the upcoming feast day.

"And don't forget to tell the tailor" the Holy One says, "That I must have the shirt by the Holy Day."

So the disciples insist with the tailor that he promise to have the shirt done on time.

"Why," the tailor said, "In two days, God willing, I will have the shirt finished! Come then to pick it up!"

But on the day appointed, when the disciples go to get the shirt, it is not ready.

"Come back in two more days," the tailor said to them. "With God's help, I will definitely have it done by then. But two days later the shirt is still not finished.

"Come back in two more days," the tailor says, "and if God speeds my fingers it will surely be ready."

"Master," they said to the Holy One, "What do we do now?"

"Go back to the tailor," the Holy One said, "and ask him how long it will take him to finish the shirt if he leaves God out of it."

Point: Old answers to new questions don't count.

Every age is meant to answer its own question for its own time.

You are the people whose ministry it is to honor the great spiritual questions of every age—particularly our own.

And you do it in institutions for which the past is a friendlier more familiar place than the future—so much for all their talk about faith.

Your ministry is a sacred task, an eternal trust. For all our sakes.

You are the people who build the spiritual bridge that will carry the rest of us from yesterday to tomorrow.

If it had not been for publishers and copiers and booksellers,

If it had not been for the ones of every age before us—scribes, copyists, printers—who multiplied manuscripts one piece of vellum at a time, who distributed texts one tract at a time,

Who carried from place to place and people to people the ideas that shook the church and changed the world, the world as we know it would never have come to light.

God only knows what century we would still be caught in—the Church of Imperial Papacy, the Church of the Ravaging Crusades, the Church of the Theocratic States, or the Church of Parochial Ghettoism.

In your hands, clearly,—in the topics you raise and the questions you ask—lie our best chance to live to see the Church of the People of God.

In your hands lie the questions of the present and the church of tomorrow, as well.

There is great concern now about the future of print, but, in the end, the nature of the devices we use to communicate the ideas we need to hear is, at base, irrelevant. We have survived the loss of illuminated manuscripts, and movable type, and talkies and tapes, and comic books and cliff notes. And we will surely survive Amazon and Whispernet and iPad and YouTube.

But only if the ideas are fresher than the technology. Only if the ideas are vibrant and relevant. Only if the ideas we write and publish and sell, answer the questions of what it means to be both human and spiritual.

What you choose to publish will either make us see the path to where we would not go or will deny us the best of the past that lies in the future God has in store for us. It is the very

question of questions that drives my own writing.

The questions I ask, for instance, are the simple ones:

What is the role and place of women in church and world?

What spirituality do we need today if today is to be a holy one?

What is faith in a time of shifting absolutes and what is the God of creation in a time of evolution?

What do ancient scriptures have to say to the now that is fresher than yesterday and clearer than ever?

What is a truly a spiritual life,—a “religious life”—for times such as these in which every institution on the face of the earth—education, family, marriage, government, economy and gender roles—is changing?

In the book for TS Nelson on the liturgical year, for instance, the question that guided my writing was a simple one:

“What is ritual really about—the act and the words or the meaning? Is the liturgical year the celebration of a calendar? And is the calendar itself enough or is it the recognition of a reality in my own life? And if so, what is it?”

That question moved the topic of Eucharist beyond rubrics and rituals, beyond the bounds of maleness, to the purpose for which the Eucharist is intended:

The binding of the entire Christian community—both Catholic and Protestant—in a commitment to life as Jesus lived it by living that same life ourselves today.

It is far and beyond the routine living out of a church calendar to a meaningful living out of our own lives because of it.

If the question under the book is “What’s it all about?”—this thing we call Eucharist—the answer is surely, “It’s all about us.” In *Uncommon Gratitude*—done for Liturgical Press with Archbishop Rowan Williams, our question was even closer to the bone.

Here the question is “It’s fine to talk about “Praising God”—that is certainly the presbyteral rhetoric, the priestly poetry we’ve all come to expect from pulpits but please...give me a break:

I lost my job, I’m not singing alleluia for that!

My child died, my husband left me, we lost our pension in the crash, the bank took our

house back, we can't pay for our long term medical needs.

We're broke, we're sad, we're angry, we're lost and 'alleluia' does not quite fill our needs right now.

Or does it?

What are the answers to life when there are no answers?

When canon laws and rubrics and church calendars and ancient feast days neither move my heart nor soothe my soul nor feed my faith, don't talk to me about what it means to be Catholic or Anglican, Methodist or Orthodox. Talk to me—you two together—Catholic nun and Anglican Archbishop—in an era when some people in both churches are really trying to pull our churches apart even more than in the past—talk to me together about what it means to be Christian rather than what it means to have inherited the reformation.

It is then that contemporary spirituality steps in to provide the answers that synods and solemnities seem to avoid:

Then real spirituality asks the question that underlies it all:

“What does all this mean—alleluia and amen and I believe and I promise...to me and thee here and now?”

Without the church politics and leftover theological debates and divided convictions on what it means to be relevant and religious, what does faith really mean, really require, in a world of evolution and technology, of predator drones and religious pluralism, of a God who is clearly both heartfully present and painfully absent?

And it was two publishers—an Evangelical publisher and a Benedictine publisher—who ignored all the arbitrary lines between us—Catholic and Protestant, Anglican and Roman, male and female, nun and priest—to make Christianity whole again.

Without you where would the churches really be?

Only when the Lisbon earthquake in 1855 wiped out the entire city and sent people screaming into the streets, “O God, if there is a God, save my soul,” did writers and publishers finally face and penetrate the question of what it meant to believe in God when evil was rife, and science was beginning to understand the difference between the magic of religion and the nature of nature.

And that has always been the case:

When the question was what about sin it was the publication of Augustine's

“Confessions” that interrupted the long, dark theological debates of the early church about “Perfection” with the answers people needed on the streets.

When the question was about the meaning of scripture today, it was the publication of Origen’s commentary on the “Song of Songs” that brought allegory to the dry dust of biblical history.

When the question was where is God in the middle of social chaos and the loss of the organizing principles of the Roman Empire, it was the distribution of the Rule of Benedict that brought the Christian community to fullness of life again.

When the question was what do we do when the church itself is full of sin and sickness of soul, it was the works of the reformers and mystics—Therese of Avila’s “Interior Castle” and Catherine of Siena’s “Dialogues,” of Martin Luther’s “The Freedom of A Christian” and Ignatius Loyola’s “Spiritual Exercises” that gave hope of a new ecclesial springtime.

When the question was what exactly is priesthood meant to be about in a world bereft of real pastors but full of the new poor made destitute by the emerging mercantile world, it was the publication of Francis de Sales “Introduction to a Devout Life”—in the face of French quietism and rigorous Jansenism, and their negative spiritualities—that brought a reform of the priesthood and heart to the image of God that saved the church for the people and is, indeed, a light in this dark time still.

When the question was the collapse of humanity in a barbaric Nazi world, it was the publication of Bonhoeffer’s “On Christian Discipleship” that kept a small light of Christian witness alive in Christian bookstores everywhere.

The list of publications over the ages that have expanded the soul of the church and saved its heart is legion.

They survived the index by ignoring it. They prepared for the launch of Vatican II by providing an arena of public discussion for it. Before, during and after the Council.

They gave hope to those a Vatican I church would try to smother even now.

It is you, in other words, publishers and book sellers, who face the questions for us all, who keep the questions alive, who make questions the footpath on the way to God—whatever the era, whatever the challenge, whatever the threat to freedom of thought and the perils of personal faith in an institutional time.

As the people of God, we owe you much.

As an institution, the church owes you even more.

The books you publish, the books you put on your shelves seed the soul of tomorrow.

More than that, they enable the thinking Christian to go on when the church lights go out and ideas big enough to show the way are being veiled by those who prefer the comfort of darkness. You are the keepers of the ministry of the Word. Who understand that it is sacred and who, in whatever form, keep it well.

You are the keepers of questions that are soul-sized, that are dangerous, perhaps, but that are necessary if any of us are ever to be true to the Gospel we preach.

My own personal gratitude to those publishers here who have encouraged my own questions, and given my own answers air is, of course, enormous.

To those booksellers who have found space on their shelves for my own attempts to provoke new thought and new courage, I am personally deeply grateful.

As Adrian Rich wrote once, "Every time a woman speaks the truth, she makes space for every woman after her to do the same." For the sake of those women, too, I am forever grateful to you.

But more than that, I am in awe of your commitment as publishers and booksellers to grow us into a church that is equal to the God of the future.

For all our sakes, go on. For all our sakes, remember with the trooper at the car counter, that asking the right question is, in the end, the most important witness of all.

Remember, too, with the philosopher that if you are looking for manuscripts that are answers to the issues of today, you have simply not asked a big enough question.

And finally, remember with the Holy One that talking about God is not enough. Sometimes you have to leave God out of it in order to see God best. By all means, remember that what you do is holy.

Mark van Doren wrote once: "Take ideas in and treat them royally for one day one of them may be king."

That is your ministry: That has been your gift to us all.

You have led us from understanding to understanding, from being a pilgrim people to being the people of God.

Go on doing it as profoundly, as courageously and with the kind of spiritual challenge that requires us to forgo the God of the past for the sake of the God of the future.