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# Religious left needn't be ashamed to speak up

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BY REV. CLARE BUTTERFIELD

The ability of the progressive religious movement to claim public space, it seems to me, is at low ebb. How does the religious left invite itself back into the public conversation? And how do we claim our own ground of hopefulness -- and move the public conversation away from fear, where it currently resides?

The current neo-conservative viewpoint expresses itself with great certainty. It asserts that there is a battle between good and evil playing out across the political stage right now, and it's easy to know which side is which. People want certainty. The right offers it.

The left doesn't. And we can't. Certainty isn't part of our package. I can't honestly say that if we live according to what I consider moral and religious values we won't get attacked again. I don't actually think that angry crazy people doing hateful evil things is preventable. I don't think it ever was, and as humans live in closer and closer proximity we're all going to see a lot more of it.

We can reduce its frequency by not causing quite so much anger in the world, but we can't prevent it. We can't eliminate the terrible possibility -- we can only eliminate our fear of it. That loss of fear will come from the religious reckoning with our own mortality, and the acceptance that while we do not understand how, God's goodness, or the re-emergent good, or whatever you prefer to call it, makes the fact of our mortality acceptable and not a thing to be feared.

Our public faith might say I do not believe that bad events are preventable, but I also do not believe they are the will of God. I do not believe that we can be made safe from every ill-intentioned human on the planet, but I do believe that God's goodness overrides evil and that whatever befalls us, it cannot separate us from the love of God. And that love, in which I have faith, releases me from fear and allows me to be hopeful.

The right is very quick to claim God's anger. The left -- and I mean the religious left -- ought to be just as quick to claim God's love. But being liberal, we are afraid that by claiming God's love for ourselves we might somehow be impinging on the right of someone else to claim it, or impinging on the rights of those who don't share our religious views, and we would like to pause and think very well about our options before committing ourselves to a position one way or the other on a matter of such great importance. The religion of the right might demand blood sacrifice, but the religion of the left is all therapy -- it demands nothing at all.

But, again, I'm looking for where the conversation lies. In short, the progressive religious people are going to have to get over our usual discomfort with being religious in public. And we're going to have to reclaim some of the ground that we have ceded, by excessive deliberation, to the conservative religious movements. And in order to do that we are going to have to do some work on what we believe and what our beliefs imply.

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Religion demands something from us. We might not all express our faith in the same terms -- it is not important that we do -- provided that we agree that being part of a progressive religious community means that we are called to be active in the world. Learning to express this belief in terms that the larger world recognizes as religious may take some effort in our congregations, but it is, I believe, an effort worth making. Only you know what you mean by the word God. Something you believe in allows you to live hopefully in an ambiguous world. Name it.

Otherwise the only people who will be seen in the public square to speak as religious will be extremists of one kind or another. Whether people who decapitate in the name of God, or people who are sure that their armed conflict is the will of God, I am not prepared to surrender my faith to their public definition.

To the religious of the left I say "leap." Find what you can commit to and commit to it -- leap into the arms of God. Know what you believe -- be responsible for that -- and do not allow the things you hold most dear to be defined away from you by anyone.

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