



## Keep soul food on the menu

“It’s cool to love Jesus. It’s not cool to shove religion—or have your underlings shove religion—down the throat of a secular nation.”

So wrote *Ciro Scotti* in his *Business Week* column of October 29, 2004. And who would disagree? Force-feeding your religion to anybody is wrong. The Salvation Army and its people shouldn’t do it. Surely, that’s an ethical no-brainer.

First off, coercion is generally wrong, whether it’s religion or anything else. Making people do things they don’t want to do displays arrogance and disrespect for their humanity. We don’t want to be subjected to it ourselves; what would justify us doing it to others? There can be exceptions—restraining children and people who are cognitively impaired, or confining dangerous criminals—but special conditions have to apply if force against another human being is to be permitted.

Secondly, Christians should object to forcing religious belief or practice on others because of what we believe about God and about true faith.

When I was a young kid Daniel was one of my heroes. “Dare to be a Daniel/Dare to stand alone” ran the words of the Sunday School song. We lauded and admired Daniel for his refusal—at pain of his life—to become an idolater just because the emperor demanded it. Even as a child I was learning that Christians should admire those who could resist bullying.

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Lest we miss the point: the moral is not that it's wrong to coerce people into worshipping *false* gods but that it's okay to force them to believe in *Jesus*. No! Belief in God is the sort of thing that must come freely. The Gospel is good news because it's a love letter telling of the extent to which God will go to win the freely reciprocated love of human beings. Jesus said his mission included bringing deliverance for captives, reconciliation for those who are alienated from God and others. The abundant life Jesus promised cannot be forced on people.

On the other hand, Jesus' mission was to love people; and people being more than biophysical complexes, loving them meant caring about their spirits as well as their bodies. "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word comes from the mouth of God," he said. To continue the mission of Jesus, therefore, The Salvation Army cannot neglect people's souls. Therein lies the challenge.

The real question is not whether Christian ethics permits us to force our religion onto clients while they are at our mercy—that's anathema! The real question is how to act on the conviction that all people must be cared for *as people* and therefore cared for as beings with souls even when they don't want to hear that from us and when various supporters and funders get very nervous about anything that smacks of the religious.

I think we make headway when we remember that God loves people more than we do, that it is God alone that saves people, and that God has gotten into most people's lives before we do (a fact supported by the evidence that even a majority of atheists pray sometimes). So our challenge is to warrant people's trust through our character and our

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competence, and to create spaces and times in which those who want to have the cry of their spirits heard can do so.

Many people who work in the Salvation Army's social services do this with amazing skill. I'll illustrate with just one story.

Laurie is a Christian nurse who is a clinical leader in a Salvation Army hospital in Canada.

Some years ago, Laurie met up with a woman I'll call Mrs. Portokalos on the day that she had been given the unexpected bad news that she was ill with a progressing cancer for which there was no cure. The only available treatment would be palliative. Mrs. Portokalos was admitted to the hospital and Laurie started her usual assessment, which, besides a medical history, included asking about social supports, about what her concerns were now that she knew her prognosis, what she valued, and how she would define her hopes for the time she had remaining. To go into these social, psychological and spiritual matters is something nurses see as integral to good palliative care nursing. Naturally questions came up about links to faith communities.

"Is there a priest you would like me to call?" Laurie asked.

"No."

"We have a Spiritual Care Department at the hospital. Would you like me to call one of the Salvation Army chaplains?"

"No."

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Then, despite the fact that the spiritual door seemed closed, Mrs. Portokalos began to open up about not being religious but that she thought she still believed in God. The visit ended with an invitation to have Laurie talk about this again

Details were gradually filled in. Mrs. Portokalos had two daughters with whom there was a somewhat rocky relationship. She was divorced from a man who had abused her. Her family had disapproved of the marriage from the beginning since her husband was outside their ethnic group and outside their faith. She had been alienated from her religious community because a priest had sexually abused her as an adolescent and her parents had never believed her.

Loneliness, anger, sorrow, grief, plagued by a sense of injustice over wrongs she had suffered, burdened by feelings of her own guilt... To think that addressing the pain of dying people is the single most important thing is to betray an ignorance about how people die. Mrs. Portokalos's existential suffering was at least as great as the ravages of the cancer. Soul sickness calls for attention, and the question is who is going to be there to attend to it. Who is going to be capable? Who is going to be trusted to "go there"? Is it within the mandate or the professional scope of a nurse?

Some time into her hospitalization Mrs. Portokalos asked Laurie specifically to meet with her two daughters, to let them know what was going on with her disease and offer supports, but also to talk about spiritual things and to pray with them. She did. Later, Mrs. Portokalos asked for the sacrament of the sick and so a priest was called.

Not many days later, Laurie was just passing through on regular rounds. She stopped and commented on the frost that had patterned the window in Mrs. Portokalos's room.

"How beautiful," she remarked. "An example of God's artistry."

"Today would be a beautiful day to die, don't you think?" Mrs. Portokalos replied, taking Laurie off guard.

Laurie had not thought death imminent. Perhaps Mrs. Portokalos had a premonition. Whatever the case, she did in fact die within 24 hours.

What could be a more powerful validation of one's ministry than to be at the side of a woman once alienated from things religious who, in part because of your words, is able to embrace God's beauty in a frosted window pane on her dying day!? No force was needed. But it was imperative that the hospital encourage nurses to ask patients if it is well with their souls, that the nurse ask the question, and she be equipped to follow up whatever answer came.

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