

Going Bunco: The Age of Innocence

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [April 3, 2007](#) issue

Draw up your chairs, younger ones, and I will describe a moment in the Age of Innocence, back in late-medieval time of 1945-1949. Bring your chairs in close so you can be sure you are hearing right. Let me set the scene: it is New Year's Eve in one of those years. A score of us collegians are home for Christmas and—yes—have just been to church. Not only that, we formed a little choir, rehearsed and sang before we heard the sermon, and after the benediction went to one of our homes to party.

Our plans gave our pastor grist for his preaching. He said something like this: “I know you young people in the balcony. You are in church now, but later you are going carousing [pronounced *caroosing*] and partying, giving in to all the temptations of youth. And if something should happen to you and you cannot repent, you will be consigned to outer darkness, where there will be weeping and wailing of teeth.” Had he been on a lectionary committee he would have voted for Luke 13:28 as the text for New Year's Eve, and he might have found that the text threatened the “gnashing”—not the “wailing”—of teeth. We decided to name our annual event “The Weeping and Wailing of Teeth” party.

There, at our nonalcoholic event, we would play Bunco. I am embarrassed to admit this, since it is so remote from contemporary experience that I'll likely lose that last shred of credibility. But there it is.

I bring all this up after having read a January 30 article in the post-Age of Innocence *Wall Street Journal* that claims that Bunco is back. This time it is not lusty and lustful teeth-gnashers and teeth-wailers who play, writes Ellen Byron, but senior women in groups of 12 who roll the dice and, when the right numbers come up, shout “Bunco!” Byron says that the women often “pony up a small donation for the kitty” to reward the player who rolled the most buncos. We didn't pony up because that is what Catholics did at Bunco and bingo, and we would never do that. Think of the wailing of *their* teeth after decades in outer darkness.

Apparently there are Bunco kits, “Bunco Babe” T-shirts and a Bunco party cookbook. “Bunco is therapy!” aver some of those interviewed by Ms. Byron. But I digress. I was implying that there were great changes in American culture.

Still, there is one constant, which is a durable and growing belief in hell. In 1997 only 56 percent of polled Americans believed in hell, whereas 70 percent did so by 2004. If things keep going, that belief might rise to 100 percent in a few decades. Such data inspire sociologists and other suspicious sorts who cannot see that we are more virtuous because more of us believe in hell. Fear of hell and the desire to keep teeth ungnashed and unwailed are deterrents. R. Todd Mangum of Biblical Theological Seminary in Hatfield, Pennsylvania (*Christianity Today*, February), visits “Three Models of Hell” and urges that a loving God is “never cruel” for meting out penalties, in this case eternal, that are “appropriate to crimes committed.” “The prophets warn that God executes his wrath without pity. . . . Jesus and the New Testament writers confirm that God’s future outpouring of wrath will be horrific. . . . If such biblical descriptions of God’s character strike us as harsh, perhaps we need to consider whether our thinking has been compromised by the sentimental humanism of our culture.” Finally: “God will not acquit the unrepentant guilty.”

Include among the guilty the participants in choir parties on New Year’s Eve, 1945-1949, where we laughingly, sentimentally, humanistically, Christianly unrepentant partiers hoped that the “never cruel” God would go easy on those of us who carooosed with shouts of “Bunco!”