Cultivating uncertainty

Marilynne Robinson calls it “a form of reverence.”

by Peter W. Marty in the December 18, 2019 issue

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Many of the perspectives of journalist H. L. Mencken (1880–1956) don’t align with the values typically found in the pages of the *Christian Century*. His diaries are full of explicitly racist and anti-Semitic rants. He was an avowed opponent of organized religion and representative democracy, a militaristic hawk, a skeptic regarding large portions of math and science, and a man obsessed with his own legacy.

Yet for all the cynicism of this influential curmudgeon, Mencken was a scholar of American English who often wrote famously clever and colorful things. When outraged readers would write to Mencken at the Baltimore Sun, he was known to have replied with a preprinted postcard:

> Dear Sir or Madam:
> You may be right.

Yours sincerely,
H. L. Mencken

The genius of that postcard is its succinctness, its abrupt dismissal of further conversation, and its hint of affirmation. It must have been a great way to defang angered readers bent on starting a quarrel.

Imagine a parent saying to her wildly argumentative child, “You may be right. Just remember, I love you. And I’m the mom.” Or picture a home plate umpire telling a batter shouting at him in dispute over the strike just called, “You may well be right. But I’m the umpire, for this game at least.” Depending on how one were to speak such lines, they could help soften the world, even if they wouldn’t eliminate deep divides.

Century editors aren’t about to copy Mencken’s method for communicating with readers who take issue with an editorial perspective or a particular essay. We see our role as starting conversations, not ending them.

But there is reason for those of us who write and react to other peoples’ writings to take Mencken’s one-liner to heart: “You may be right.” I’ve long been of the opinion that Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is missing something elemental. Beneath our fundamental human need for food, water, safety, and intimacy is our personal need to be right. Being right or feeling in the right is highly seductive. But if my need to be right is more important than my being in relationship with the person whom I’ve engaged in conversation or argument, I’m in trouble.

Arrogant certainty is not only a threat to civility; it also overlooks our need to be wise, patient, and caring. It doesn’t aid our spiritual life. Our Christian responsibility is not to claim to know more than we do. The world is in greater danger from people claiming to know too much rather than too little, Reinhold Niebuhr once observed. Few things seem to have boiled the blood of Jesus more than religious people who behaved as if they knew all things. That self-righteousness didn’t sit well with One who desired that people point their lives toward the truth, not claim entire possession of it.

“There is something about certainty that makes Christianity un-Christian,” Marilynne Robinson once wrote, concerned with narrow and bitter understandings of faith. Expressing her own commitment to be a thoughtful Christian, she continued, “I have cultivated uncertainty, which I consider a form of reverence.” That reverence seems

about right for we who can only “see in a mirror dimly . . . and [who] know only in part.”

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