

## **Bushels and Lampstands, Loose Lips and Martyrs: A Response to Jonathan Malesic**

By Pamela Cooper-White

In “Touchdown Jesus: On the Wages of Discipleship in America,” Jonathan Malesic has offered an intriguing proposal—that Christians should emulate Cyril of Jerusalem, Søren Kierkegaard and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and practice their faith in secret, rather than trumpeting a triumphalist Christianity in the public arena. His argument is waged against those, such as his exemplar Tim Tebow, who might be seen as cynically seeking monetary or political gain by flaunting their faith in the name of evangelism. The danger of such public witnessing, in Malesic’s view, is a counterfeiting of genuine Christian identity, thereby “dull[ing] the edges of any distinctive witness they might have hoped to make in the American public sphere.” His recommendation in response is that, at least for a time, American Christians should stop “singing the triumphalist, rah-rah fight songs, stop shopping themselves around for the best free agent deals, and remove their ichthus logos,” so that genuine faith could be nurtured, set apart from any secular benefits that a claim to Christian identity might earn them.

Malesic has made a good argument for a plausible response to the problem of public Christian witness as he has construed it. As an Episcopalian, notorious for our reticence toward public testimony, I am delighted and even perhaps a bit relieved to hear that I am justified in not wearing my Christianity on my sleeve! But therein lies one of several “rubs” that trouble me in response to this article. There is more than one Christianity—more than one Christian theology, and more than one Christian praxis. There is also more than one America (as Malesic himself notes in his aside contrasting Birmingham with Berkeley). There is more than one meaning to the notion of secrecy. And there is more than one form of Christian witness. The following, necessarily brief reflections, are meant less to contest Malesic’s argument in relation to the

implicit Christian theology he contests (evangelical), a particular form of faith praxis (public testimony in every sphere), a particular definition of secrecy (refusal to display one's Christianity for personal gain), and witness (a cynical use of Christian identity for such gain), than to complicate both the argument and therefore Malesic's proposed solution.

The first two issues probably do not need much further elaboration. There is more than one Christianity, and more than one American public. David Tracy, for example, names at least three "publics" with which theology must concern itself: church, academy, and society.<sup>1</sup> Malesic is arguing about the proper response within a certain sector of American *society*—admittedly, a seemingly burgeoning one—in which one's public affirmation of faith is a prerequisite for votes, patronage, fans, and more. This probably corresponds more or less with what David Brooks has called "Red America,"<sup>2</sup> although even that is much too broad a characterization when it comes either to faith or to religious witness. The nation is not so simply divided into red and blue, Birmingham's and Berkeley's, as the decisive role of independent voters in this month's elections clearly shows. Take Decatur, Georgia, where Columbia's campus is located. Affectionately known as "a cross between Mayberry and Berkeley," Decatur cars sport bumper



adhesives ranging (across categories) from *ichthioi*, to " ,," to rainbow flags, to Confederate flags, to "I'm already against the next war," to "Obama-Biden" and "McCain-Palin" (yes, still). About the only bumper sticker *no* Decaturite would display is one with the name "Lieberman" in it. To whom would Tim Tebow's bible verse eye black appeal in this eclectic mix? And who in Decatur would and would not emulate it? Clearly, there is not a simple answer to these questions.

What about Tracy's first public, the church? Columbia Seminary itself, with its increasingly diverse community, perhaps provides a good example here. While a majority of

M.Div. students are Presbyterian, this subset alone cannot be painted with a single brush, either theologically or politically. It could be argued that we represent a plurality of Christianities. Our students form evangelical fellowships and bible studies, travel to the School of the Americas to protest U.S. complicity in Latin American death squads, seek field education and long-term vocations in struggling urban congregations, small rural churches, mega-churches, black churches, Korean churches, Hispanic churches, wealthy white suburban churches, storefronts, campus chaplaincies, and the U.S. Navy. And none of these congregations in itself can be easily characterized as monolithic in social attitude or in theological conviction. In addition to PCUSA students, faculty, directors and alumni/ae, we enjoy a much wider diversity across all our constituencies. In relation to Malesic's central thesis, some of us (whether "evangelical," "liberal," or identified by some other overly simplifying label) might be too prone to trumpet our faith, while a good many of us would be perhaps much too reluctant to do so!

Columbia also falls into Tracy's category of the "academy," as an institution of higher education. With regard to witnessing to the faith, Columbia, as a seminary of the Presbyterian Church, requires of all its faculty and students that we publicly affirm that we "trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and through him believe in one triune God" at an annual fall convocation. While significantly theological mission emphases are outlined in the Seminary's governing documents, much interpretation is still left (appropriately, in my ecumenical view) to the conscience of each member of the community. I have taught in institutions both where such commitments were required, and where they were not. Vows appropriate to a seminary of an explicitly confessional denomination might, indeed, not be appropriate to a non-denominational or interfaith school. As a divinity school student at Harvard in the early 1980's, I recall a vigorous debate whether faculty should be required personally to avow *any* faith, with the

consensus view (including that of several agnostic faculty) being “no.” The national 10,000-member American Academy of Religion, to which both scholars of religion and theologians belong, intentionally maintains a largely phenomenological stance toward the study of religion, in which adherents of a wide variety of faith traditions and none can find a home within the various fields, sub-disciplines, and study groups represented. In my own primary group at AAR, a friend recently questioned whether my paper was “too theological,” but then acknowledged that the critical discipline of pastoral theology is one among several disciplines that belong under the umbrella field of “Psychology, Culture, and Religion.” Academic freedom is a tricky and sometimes contested category within religiously grounded academies, especially those whose mission is to form students for ordained or other officially sponsored ministries in a particular branch of faith. The appropriateness of personal testimony within academic institutions will vary widely, depending on the institution’s specific mission and constituency.

These complexities lead to further reflection, then, on the very nature of testimony itself, and the meaning and desirability (or undesirability) of secrecy. First, to address secrecy: ethicist Sissela Bok’s definition demonstrates the breadth of meanings associated with this category. She assigns “concealment, or hiding, to be the defining trait of secrecy. It presupposes separation, a setting apart of the secret from the non-secret, and of keepers of a secret from those excluded.”<sup>3</sup> The etymology of the word in English is from the Latin *secretus*: “set apart, withdrawn, hidden,” derived from *se* (without) + *cernere* (separate).<sup>4</sup> Because, in Bok’s words, “[t]he separation between insider and outsider is inherent in secrecy, and to think something secret is already to envisage potential conflict between what insiders conceal and outsiders want to inspect or lay bare,” secrecy can be used for a variety of purposes, not all of them benign. Bok includes “sacredness, intimacy, privacy, silence, prohibition, furtiveness, deception,”<sup>5</sup> as well as the

element of surprise<sup>6</sup> as concepts all having some relationship to how we understand secrecy to function. Secrecy *per se* is neither good nor bad, but aspects of secrecy pervade all aspects of human life from everyday privacy, to the concealment of shameful deeds. Even within the precincts of religion and transcendent mystery, secrecy can be invoked to protect what is held sacred in a religious tradition, or to hide the ritual abuses of destructive cults.

Bok's interpretation of the etymology of the English word is that it "originally meant to sift apart, to separate as with a sieve. It bespeaks discernment, the ability to make distinctions, to sort out and draw lines: a capacity that underlies not only secrecy but all thinking."<sup>7</sup> By the same token, Malesic's article calls for more discernment around the uses and abuses of secrecy in Christian practice. His argument begs the question what kinds of secrecy might be beneficial, and what uses of secrecy might be unhealthy, even destructive. What distinctions should be drawn among the various forms of secrecy, and their relative merit or dangers?

In my own fields of pastoral theology and pastoral psychology, a common clinical distinction is made between *secrecy* and *confidentiality*.<sup>8</sup> For example, drawing on the practice of pastoral care and counseling, our normal pastoral practice would be to maintain confidentiality—that is, a promise not to reveal to others, except in the context of equally confidential supervision, what a parishioner shares with us in a pastoral conversation. Confidentiality is a form of concealment whose goal is to protect the privacy, trust, and even vulnerability of a person who comes to us in good faith (the meaning of *con-fidence*—with-faith, with-trust). Confidentiality, in the words of one Roman Catholic priest on the child abuse video "Hear their Cries," is a *reverencing of information*.<sup>9</sup> It is a practice that recognizes that the person who has disclosed intimate information to us is still the holder of that information, and the rights to further disclosure. We practice confidentiality in professional helping relationships,

as in friendships and family relationships, in order to protect what is private, even which, if exposed indiscriminately could cause humiliation or violate boundaries of what is sensitive and therefore private, and also to protect the trust and integrity of the relationship itself.

Confidentiality, like the healthy boundaries on which it depends, strengthens relationships.

However, confidentiality has its limits. When we are asked by another to hide something that is not only private, but dangerous to the person making the disclosure, or to a third party, we are required to override the value of confidentiality with the value of safety. To quote Bok again:

The premises supporting confidentiality are strong, but they cannot support practices of secrecy—whether by individual clients, institutions, or professionals themselves—that undermine and contradict the very respect for persons and the human bonds that confidentiality was meant to protect.<sup>10</sup>

While we never violate confidentiality lightly (and probably should not do so without supervision or consultation with a professional colleague), pastoral caregivers and counselors are bound by a code of ethics that we “first do no harm.”<sup>11</sup> We “widen the circle of care,” to quote my Columbia colleague Dr. Skip Johnson, so that parishioners or patients who are suicidal, or making credible violent threats against others, can be helped by preventing the harm that they intend to commit. Reports of suicidality, child abuse, and homicidality require us to violate privacy in order to protect the wellbeing of the most vulnerable in the situation—and occasionally, this means an external third person. In both instances—confidentiality, and reporting imminent harm—we are bound by the same overarching rubric: to promote safety and to protect the vulnerable.

In family systems, too, we recognize the need for boundaries of privacy among family members (as opposed to families in which everyone is enmeshed in everyone else’s “business,” including even their most private thoughts and feelings—in Murray Bowen’s terms, an

“undifferentiated ego mass”<sup>12</sup>). Healthy differentiation (that is, being able to remain close to others while maintaining one’s own emotions, beliefs, and choices), while rightly critiqued by feminist theorists as an over-valuing of individuality if taken to extremes, is necessary for good communication and care within families, and for the growth of each individual member within it.

How might this rubric, if borrowed from pastoral theology and pastoral psychology, be applied to Malesic’s call for secrecy among Christians about their identity and practices? I think the overarching motive of protection might be useful here. What or whom would such secrecy seek to protect? If it is to protect sin-prone Christians from ourselves, putting a road-block in the way of our claiming Christian identity to get elected to office, get a job, or some other utilitarian or material aim, then the caution against triumphalist self-promotion is well taken. Such pharisaical Christians would “already have their reward.” (Matt. 6:2, 5) If secrecy—or perhaps, better, reticence—is motivated by respect for persons from other religious traditions, replacing arrogant assertions of Christian supremacy or supercessionism with genuine sharing and curiosity about the other, then it might also be salutary. Its goal would be the growth of mutual respect in relationship. Good interfaith dialogue, at least in its contemporary form, demands more than a bland search for similarities, or mere “tolerance,” but an embrace of diversity, a willingness to enter into respectful mutual challenge, and a careful balance between an honest claiming of one’s own beliefs, and a genuine openness to learning from the other.<sup>13</sup> Such respect and balance is also much needed among Christians from differing theological traditions, denominations, and cultural expressions. Thus secrecy, or at least a practice of humility and reticence about one’s Christianity, may have value in certain contexts.

There are dangers to secrecy as well. If secrecy serves to set Christians and their sacred practices apart from the public sphere, it might well set up (or reinforce?) a smug “us-them”

dichotomy in which conversion to a particular brand of Christianity is the only path to genuine dialogue or relationship. Also, as we have already seen in some circles, secret gatherings of self-avowed Christians for ostensible purposes of Bible study and fellowship, could create insider-outsider dynamics in workplaces, schools, and even in government. For example, behind the very public National Prayer Breakfast stands the secretive Washington Christian group known as The Fellowship or The Family. This organization has ties to Ugandan politicians attempting to pass legislation to make homosexuality punishable by death, as well as the more mundanely sordid “sponsor of a residence on Capitol Hill that has served as a dormitory and meeting place for a cluster of politicians who ran into ethics problems.”<sup>14</sup> Journalist Jeff Sharlet, who wrote a book about The Family, stated that “This is their theological stance... Their leader, Doug Coe, says that the more invisible you can make your organization, the more influence it will have.”<sup>15</sup> Bok quotes Lord Acton (1834-1902), famous for the saying “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” as also saying that “*everything secret degenerates*” (emphasis added)<sup>16</sup> If knowledge is power, and some are excluded from knowledge/power, then “secrecy, like other exercises of power, can corrupt.”<sup>17</sup> This is the basis for much of the postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault’s critique of medicine, criminology, and psychology—that by creating esoteric professional languages, practitioners not only gain necessary knowledge, but control over the *access* to knowledge, and the associated capacity to make decisions regarding others’ health, freedom, sexuality, identity formation, and beliefs more generally.<sup>18</sup>

Secrecy also, by creating a circle of insiders, tends to exclude voices that might offer feedback, even criticism.<sup>19</sup> If Christianity becomes a secret site for groupthink, can honest theological disputation survive? The Reformation was born out of just such dissent and even ecclesiastical disobedience, when honest disputation was punishable by excommunication ,

torture, and death. Further, who would decide who's in and who's out in such a secret society? While democratic principles might obtain, it is just as easy to imagine either an autocratic magisterium or mob rule, since the circle drawn around secrecy would effectively expel all dissidents and repulse external investigation.

Finally, the label of "secret" is in itself a well-known marketing ploy. It has been used to plug everything from weight loss techniques to spiritual vitality and success in all aspects of one's life. A google search for "weight loss secrets" yielded 2,820,000 web sites (most offering their secrets for a fee). Rhonda Byrne's DVD "The Secret," which went viral in 2007 with Oprah Winfrey's help, promises that "you *can* have it all, and, in fact, you already hold the power to make that happen."<sup>20</sup> Byrne's best-selling book, *The Secret*, and its sequel, *The Power*, drawn in part (and without attribution) to Rosicrucian teachings, were marketed using *DaVinci Code*<sup>21</sup>-like imagery to suggest an esoteric quasi-Christian mystery religion of limitless prosperity and success.

A similar question re: the meaning, desirability, and motives behind secrecy might also be asked, then, about one's motives for witnessing. We witness, presumably, to the Gospel—the good news (*euangelion*) of God in Christ Jesus. But this raises a further question: what *is* that good news, exactly? And what do we mean when we say we are proclaiming the gospel? What, in fact, is evangelism? Different Christianities, with differing theological traditions, will construe the meaning of the good news, and the related purpose of witnessing and evangelism differently. Is the good news primarily that we have eternal life by confessing that we believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior? (e.g., Romans 10:13) Is the good news primarily the in-breaking of the realm of God, the proclamation to the poor of release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and the year of the Lord's favor? (Luke 4:18) While

these brief statements represent, perhaps, dominant themes in “evangelical” and “liberal” Christianity, respectively, they are only two interpretations, and already contain a myriad of different readings. The Bible, or even the Gospels, are not univocal on what the good news is (as they seldom are on anything).

If one takes the first view, one would genuinely witness *to* Christianity in order to convert others (leaving aside for a moment more cynical purposes of witnessing), seeking the goal of salvation or eternal life for oneself and others (based on a literal reading of, e.g., John 3:15-16, John 6:47, John 11:25, Acts 4:12, Romans 10:13). If the purpose of witnessing is to convert more people to Christianity, then displaying one’s Christian identity makes sense. Yes, such display can have negative consequences—it can be used cynically for political or material gain, or simply to signify that one is part of a desired in-club. But if the goal is to win souls for Christ, then using the tools and the media of secular marketing would make good sense. There is, for example, a Wiki-How on “How to accept Christ as your Savior.”<sup>22</sup> Who is to say that Tim Tebow’s motives for witnessing are not genuine (or at least no more mixed than the rest of us)?

Taking the second view, one would genuinely witness, *because s/he is a Christian*, to the wellbeing of individuals and communities, the living into God’s reign of peace and justice in this life now. In this tradition (in which I include myself), becoming or being a Christian is not so much a cognitive belief or a decision to follow Jesus (although that may be a part of what happens in one’s daily *habitus*, with many variations on how even such following is interpreted), as it is an ongoing process of *con-version* (turning-with) and formation, shaped and reshaped by continual participation in a sacramental community (initiated at Baptism and sustained by the Eucharistic fellowship). It is less individually-oriented, and more communally-focused. In this view, it is difficult, if not impossible, to be a Christian by oneself. One’s faith is less likely to be

demonstrated by wearing biblical eye-black, affixing an *ichthus* to one's car, or even wearing a cross around one's neck, than by living into acts of justice, mercy, and compassion, often in and through one's life in community. In the broadest sense, the good news may be spread as others may be inspired to join in similar *practices* and commitments to the common good—either as Christians, or from within their own separate religious or humanist convictions.

Many of us (including such diverse theologians as Jim Wallis, Ron Sider, Martin Marty, David Tracy, Reinhold Neibuhr, Johann Baptist Metz, Jürgen Moltmann, Dorothee Soelle, Martin Luther King, Jr., Leonardo Boff, Gustavo Gutierrez, and many others, living and dead), would argue for a robust public theology advocating for peace and justice in the present time.<sup>23</sup> We would not all agree on the specific contents of such witness, but we would agree about the necessity for a vigorous and critically informed public witness, grounded in faith and inspired by Christian Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, for the sake of the healing of the world (*tikkun o'lam*). Unlike the material co-optation of some versions of post-Constantinian Christian testimony that Malesic bewails, this vision would most often be counter-cultural, anti-materialistic, and subversive of the dominant society and its status quo of power and privilege. In fact, it would look a lot like Jesus' own parabolic, profoundly saving, and at times poke-in-the-eye critique of both religion and society.

To conclude, the biblical Greek word for witness is *martys*—martyr! To witness to one's faith, authentically, in ancient times or in the present, is certainly not to join in cynical religion marketing that Malesic has rightly critiqued. Witnessing is costly. At times in history, and in some places in today's world, it can cost you your life. But this is precisely the testimony to which I believe Christians are called. Not to “hide our light under a bushel” (Matt. 5:15), either to save ourselves from sinning or to save our own skins, but to “let our light so shine before

others that they may see our good works and glorify our heavenly parent.” (Matt. 5:16) We will always be (to quote Martin Luther), *simul justus et peccatur*—simultaneously saints and sinners. We will find ways to sin in public and in private, by advertising our faith or keeping it secret. Probably some of us do need to shut up, but for many of us, in a time when the most audible Christian discourse is that of the co-opted so-called “Christian right,” many of us probably need to speak up louder.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> David Brooks, “One Nation, Slightly Divisible,” *The Atlantic*, 288/5 (Dec. 2001), 53-65.

<sup>3</sup> Sissela Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Harper, Online Etymology Dictionary, at <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=secret>.

<sup>5</sup> Bok, *Secrets*, 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Bok makes a similar distinction between secrecy and privacy. *Ibid.*, 9-14.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Anton and Marie Fortune, executive producers, *Hear their Cries: Religious Responses to Child Abuse* (Seattle, WA: FaithTrust Institute, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> Bok, *Secrets*, 135. She further examines the category of professional confidentiality and its limits, pp. 116-35. While valuing the necessity of a general rule of confidentiality among doctors and patients, clergy and penitents, etc., she cautions that confidentiality should not override the duty to expose violent or criminal behavior.

<sup>11</sup> “*Primum non nocere*,” first attributed to the ancient Hippocratic oath, and one of the maxims of ethics, especially medical ethics.

<sup>12</sup> Murray Bowen, *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*, Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1978. See also C. Margaret Hall, “The Bowen Family Theory and Its Uses,” Ch. 3, online at <http://www.bowentheory.com/thebowenfamilytheoryanditsuses3cmhall.htm>. In reference to congregations as family systems, see also Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford, 1985).

<sup>13</sup> Interfaith relations and dialogue, just in North America, constitutes a vast literature. For a useful popular overview, see Gustav Niebuhr, *Beyond Tolerance: How People in America Are Building Bridges between Faiths* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Laurie Goodstein, “National Prayer Breakfast Draws Controversy,” *New York Times*, Feb. 3, 2010, online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/04/us/politics/04prayer.html>. See also Peter J. Boyer, “Frat House for Jesus: The Entity behind C Street,” *The New Yorker*, Sept. 13, 2010, online at [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/09/13/100913fa\\_fact\\_boyer?currentPage=3](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/09/13/100913fa_fact_boyer?currentPage=3).

<sup>15</sup> Jeff Sharlet, *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), cited in *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Bok, *Secrets*, 25.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> E.g., Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse of Power*, trans. Rupert Swyer (New York: Vintage, 1982).

<sup>19</sup> Bok, *Secrets*, 25.

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<sup>20</sup> Kelefa Sanneh, "Power Lines: What's behind Rhonda Byrne's Spiritual Empire?" *The New Yorker*, Sept. 13, 2010, online at [http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2010/09/13/100913crat\\_atlarge\\_sanneh](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2010/09/13/100913crat_atlarge_sanneh).

<sup>21</sup> Dan Brown, *The DaVinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003) and its subsequent movie version (directed by Ron Howard, Sony Pictures, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.wikihow.com/Accept-Christ-As-Your-Savior>.

<sup>23</sup> For example, see the magazine *Sojourners*, and the Sojourners web site at <http://www.sajo.net>. Tracy's book *The Analogical Imagination*, cited above, is a strong critical argument for public theology. See also the *Online Journal for Public Theology* at <http://www.pubtheo.com/>. The names cited above in parentheses are familiar enough that I will leave the reader to a google search for more in-depth discussion of each one's life and works.