

Believers put limits on God

By TIMOTHY O'TOOLE

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You are familiar with the HMO commercial in which a dissatisfied patient waits less than patiently for treatment by the group's physician. She turns to the man seated next to her and laments, "I wanted the other guy."

If you've been following Pat Robertson's antics in the news, you might wonder what God for whom he claims to speak. Orlando, Fla., passes a gay-friendly ordinance, and Robertson threatens the community with divine retribution. Dover, Pa., voters oust a creationist school board, and Pat informs them that God will not help them in case of disaster. Venezuela president Hugo Chavez displeases Robertson, and he pronounces a fundamentalist fatwa calling for his assassination. I am not sure what God Pat Robertson speaks for. Is it Zeus, Thor, Baal or Apophis? I want the other God, the one of mercy and compassion. The one who knows what it is like to be human -- cold and hungry, tempted and tortured, lonely and dispirited. The God who was not afraid to speak to the Samaritan woman at the well. The God who stands ready to accept all of us as we are. The God of Charlotte Elliott, who wrote the hymn "Just As I Am."

I turn to the religion page of my local paper to learn of a Methodist minister who achieved some notoriety and precipitated liturgical litigation by denying membership to a gay man. Ultimately, the minister's authority counted more than their "open minds, open doors" slogan, and the gay man was denied membership in that congregation, though there are other Methodist congregations that would greet him with open arms.

Recently, PBS's News Hour included a feature on the Catholic Church's effort to root out homosexuals, first in seminaries, then in parishes. It doesn't apply the same effort to

heterosexuals, no matter how frequently they stray from their vow of celibacy. While most mainstream churches accept gays and lesbians into membership, they are all struggling with the issue of ordination of gays and lesbians. "Don't ask, don't tell" is not restricted to the U.S. military. How ironic that at a time when so many churches face declining enrollment, and dwindling religious vocations, sexual orientation is the new litmus test for a Christian.

If an Ethiopian eunuch can ask Philip (in Acts 8:36) "See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?" how can we create manmade hindrances when God desires inclusion and acceptance?

I want the God who accepts us with our imperfections, if they are imperfections. The God who doesn't insist that we shave our head, or grow long sideburns, or give 10 percent of our net worth to a TV evangelist. The God who doesn't insist on a dress code for entry into the temple.

The United Church of Christ produced a provocative TV commercial last year, featuring velvet ropes and muscular, T-shirted bouncers guarding a church door. Unlike most congregations, this make-believe church had so many people flocking to its doors, that it could be selective -- turning away gays, minorities and the disabled. Many TV stations refused to air this commercial, fearing it would hit a nerve with other denominations. The UCC has certainly captured the essence of acceptance in their TV campaign. I encourage you to catch their intriguing commercial on the Internet at <http://www.stillspeaking.com/default-1.htm>.

Then ask yourself if your congregation is welcoming and accepting.

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