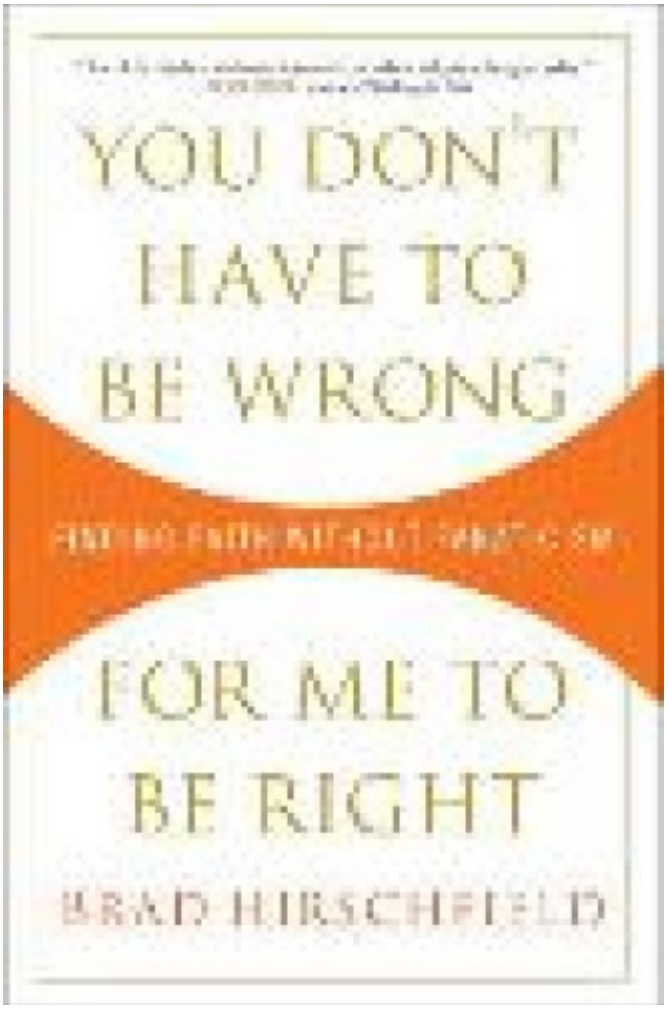
Big enough God

By Peter W. Marty in the January 13, 2009 issue

In Review



You Don't Have to Be Wrong for Me to Be Right: Finding Faith Without Fanaticism

Brad Hirschfield
Harmony

Religion possesses unbelievable power. It can offer meaning, shape culture and transform lives in the best of ways. But when something possesses the power to perform good, it can also contain the power to do harm. A bit like ammonium nitrate, which can fertilize a soybean crop with valuable nitrogen or blow up a federal building in a crowded city center, religion has the potential to evoke beauty or wreak havoc.

Brad Hirschfield understands the two-edged character of religion as well as anyone. Raised an Orthodox Jew on Chicago's North Side, Hirschfield found his childhood passion for faith morphing into religious fanaticism as he entered his young adult years. Absolutely sure of himself and his purpose in life and thoroughly convinced that his way was the only way, he moved to Hebron, in the Palestinian West Bank, as a young man, eagerly embracing a fiery political Judaism. Packing a Bible in one hand and a 9 mm pistol in the other, this Jewish settler had arrived. No one would mess with the religious fervor of Brad Hirschfield.

Then one day it all changed. Chasing down some assailants who had attacked a group of settlers, Hirschfield and his militant buddies opened fire. Several accomplices pointed their guns into a school and killed two innocent Pales tinian children. That event cracked Hirsch field open. He became physically ill on the spot, nauseous at the sudden recognition that his religion had completely possessed him. "I was a fanatic," he now declares. The result of that traumatic day has been a life devoted to exploring the intricacies of religious fanaticism and redirecting the distorted zeal that had overtaken his heart.

Hirschfield's book is a breathtaking treatise on the perils of rigid religious behavior. A self-professed student of mercy and forgiveness as well as hatred and retribution, Hirschfield writes with compelling force about the need to challenge religious certainty gone awry—because when religious certainty is wielded as a weapon, some innocent person will pay the price and the world will become more dangerous.

Hirschfield can't take down walls between believing people, but he does function like a window-and-door contractor, cutting openings into every seam of hope he can find. Instead of allowing himself to say to others, "How come you're not what I want you to be?" Hirschfield prizes diversity and appreciates pluralism. He delights in Isaiah's vision of a God who is big enough to build a house of prayer for all peoples.

In his current post as president of the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership and as a popular radio commentator on religion and society, Hirsch field has a platform for wrestling with big and provocative issues. The course of his life since Hebron has led him to challenge nearly every voice that fuels religious intolerance, inspires violence or insists that someone who is different must be an enemy. The magic of the man is his capacity to speak and write with deep humility. *Respect*, as in respect of others, may be one of his favorite words; *smugness* may be one of his least favorite.

In a world where the exchange of religious ideas often is reduced to who is right and who is wrong, Hirschfield has little patience with back-and-forth shouting. Life is too short and too precious for people to behave with such arrogance. There is something bigger in life than “being right” or “having the whole truth,” he claims, and many religious communities can afford to become more modest.

Religions tend to be highly adept at helping their adherents feel closely connected. Shared language and ritual practice give natural shape to a sense of community. That’s all well and good. But what often results is a coming together of like-minded people who knowingly or unknowingly exclude others. “Do we really want a world of people who look, think, and act just like we do?” Hirschfield asks. “That’s not spiritual depth or religious growth, but simply narcissism with lots of footnotes.”

What Hirschfield understands that not enough of the rest of us do is this: the more strongly we hold a religious commitment, the more open we ought to be to appreciating the commitments of people who differ. Unfortunately, the reverse becomes operative when religious fanaticism takes over. We shut down opposing viewpoints and look for ways to make the other party feel completely wrong as soon as we open our mouths. Hirschfield marries commitment and openness in some striking ways, even challenging post-Holocaust Jews to be unafraid of relinquishing the uniqueness of their suffering. He warns of the danger of playing the victim and using victimhood to justify the victimization of others.

Hirschfield is a tender-hearted man who speaks with authority. Readers will find themselves memorizing whole paragraphs of his work. His eloquent writing and his whole life’s purpose spring from hard lessons learned in shedding a life of fanaticism for the sake of adopting a new one of compassion. Thanks to some superb role models, Hirschfield has his own definition of compassion. It’s about “noticing the person in front of you before the ideology inside of you. And it’s about making

choices to privilege that person."

Privileging another person means taking his or her dignity and worth to heart no matter what the differences. "Why is it," writes Hirschfield, "that to make things, even spiritual things, more ours, we so often have to make them less someone else's? Why does being right depend on everyone else being wrong? Do other children need to be failures in order for ours to be successful? Do other women need to be ugly in order for my wife to be beautiful?" If we can make room for difference in the realms of love and beauty, Hirschfield believes, then we certainly ought to be able to think more expansively in the realms of tradition and truth.

You Don't Have to Be Wrong For Me to Be Right is a powerful resource for church, synagogue and mosque study groups that want to grow a faith that is strong enough to live with complexity. To critics who argue that he is too naive or too idealistic for this tough and sometimes heartless world, Hirschfield has this to say: "If religion and spirit and faith don't make you idealistic, what's the point? Idealism recognizes the difference between how things are and how they could be, and it expects us to get to that better place." In contrast, naïveté "says we're already there, it's fine, we've arrived. It smacks of an arrogant certainty that we will achieve all that we hope for by means that we already possess." Says Hirschfield: "We need to have horizons that are bigger than reality; we need unreasonable, soaring aspirations."

This is an unreasonably good book. It soars high above the rhetoric of many other well-intended folks who are eager to build bridges between people of divergent faiths.