

Being a Christian in a Pluralistic Society

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Only a few decades ago, well past the Second World War and into the early Sixties, American culture was almost universally regarded as based upon Christianity. Most leaders, as well as people generally, not only accepted this basis as a fact, but also more-or-less firmly agreed that that is how things ought to be.

This was especially true of educational institutions. Speeches by the Presidents of even the state schools, such as the University of California at Berkeley, often could have passed for Christian sermons. And even as late as 1965, when I came on the faculty of the University of Southern California, the prayers which the Chaplain delivered on public occasions were noticeably Christian prayers by a clearly Christian person. While that was viewed by some individuals with skepticism, boredom, or even resentment, the cultural prerogative that Christianity enjoyed was generally conceded a certain right.

No longer!

Now the university Chaplain, here or at other secular schools where there still is such an office, would never mention the name of Jesus as a basis of public prayer, but will with great care work in a little Taoism, some Vedanta or Islam, or even words that can be construed as invoking "The Goddess." And the university President may be a member of some Christian denomination. But Christian ideas and motivations will no longer be appealed to in whatever directions or appeals he or she may publicly express.

Anyone who now uses distinctively Christian language in the general university setting will at best be treated as giving voice to just one cultural bias among others. More likely, they will be treated as especially benighted or obnoxious precisely because of the exclusive role assumed for Christianity in past American culture.

Today the Christian is often regarded as the big, bad bully who has been humbled and must be punished for past misdeeds. One must accept as a fact that university life is now immersed in an irrational, but historically powerful swing against Christianity. Nothing can be done about this in the short run except recognize it and prepare to stand in the midst of it.

As followers of Jesus, it will be helpful to keep a number of things in mind:

First, pluralism is not a bad arrangement. It is a good thing. It is, in fact, a social expression of the kind of respect and care for the individual that is dictated by trust in God and love of neighbor. Therefore the Christian does not oppose pluralism as a social principle. Pluralism simply means that social or political force is not to be used to suppress the freedom of thought and expression of any citizen, or even the practice that flows from it, insofar as that practice is not morally wrong.

Pluralism does not mean that everyone is equally right in what they think and do. It does not mean that we must agree with the views or adopt the practices of those of other persuasions. It does not mean that we must like those views or practices. It does not mean that we will not appropriately express our disagreement or dislike for other viewpoints.

Pluralism also does not mean that we will not try, in respectful ways, to change the views or practices of others, by all appropriate means of persuasion, where we believe them to be mistaken. In fact, pluralism should, precisely, secure a social context in which full and free

interchange of different views on life and reality can be conducted to the greatest advantage of all. Thin-skinned and narrow-minded people may not particularly enjoy a pluralistic society, but their discomfort is vastly outweighed by the benefits to all of open and free interchange of information and ideas. The Christian, perhaps more than anyone else, has reason to favor such interchange and be confident about its outcome.

Second, the Christian gospel does not require cultural privilege or even social recognition in order to flourish. God's work is not disadvantaged by persecution, even to death, and much less then by mere pluralism. As Christians we stand now in the Kingdom of the Heavens, and it is always true that they who are for us are more than they that be against us. (I Kings 6:16) It is always true that the One who is in us is greater than the one who is in the world. (I John 4:4)

On the other hand, there can be little doubt that if the teachings and example of Jesus were generally followed in a given society, that society would be remarkably better off than any which followed another way. The constant drumbeat of moral failure and incompetence now heard from American institutions--from the universities and scientific or artistic communities to business corporations, the Church and sports--simply would not exist if Jesus were trusted and obeyed. There would be no sexual harassment, no gutted savings and loans, no homelessness or gang violence in a society that substantially accepted Christian principles of life. It is not the Christian who loses when social prejudice goes against Christ, but the society itself.

Third, pluralism in American society means that the Christian has just as much right to be explicitly a follower of Jesus, or a practitioner of traditional Christian culture, as any non-Christian or anti-Christian has to be explicitly what they are.

The pronounced "victimization" structure of contemporary moral thinking obscures this. Non-Christian perspectives see themselves as victims of past Christian domination of the social order. This often translates into an atmosphere where the non-Christian group is permitted to be assertive in ways that Christians or Christian groups are not. A kind of "redress" is thought to be in order, with the effect that the Christian becomes "fair game" for attacks and abuse that would quickly be branded as discriminatory if directed at anyone else.

From within our faith, of course, we should expect to be attacked, and even attacked "unfairly." So we are not thrown off course or even particularly surprised when it occurs. But we should also understand that that is not a part of what it means to be a good citizen in a pluralistic society. In appropriately Christlike ways we should point out to those involved that they are discriminating against us on the basis of our religion, and remind them that there is legal recourse available to us in such matters. This is especially needed in the university setting, as a shock to its internal authority system. It might provide the university with an occasion for re-evaluating its current anti-Christian biases, which are badly in need of review.

Fourth, we must keep in mind that truth and reality are not in themselves pluralistic. If your gas tank is empty, social acceptance of your right to believe that it is full will not help you get your car to run. Everything is just exactly what it is, and you can develop cultural traditions, vote, wish, or whatever you please, and that will not change a thing.

Truth and reality do not adapt to us. It is up to us to adapt to them. A four thousand year old tradition does not become truer as the years go by. If it is false or wrong, it simply continues to be a long-standing error. If it is popular, it is widespread. If adopted by the powerful, it is authoritative. But it is still wrong. Acceptance of its right to exist in a pluralistic society does not make it any more correct, and will be of no help to those following it when they finally run into reality.

Some of my intellectual friends say that this is true in the domain of "fact," but that religion is the realm of "faith." They are victims of the unfortunate delusion of current culture that "fact" is limited to what is sense-perceptible. Hence they say that whether past or current living species

where created by God or not, for example, is a matter of "faith." The implication is that for faith things are, somehow, as you think them to be. Much of what is now written in support of pluralism or "inclusivism" in religion assumes that there is no "way things are" with God, or at least that we cannot know how they are. Hence all views of God are said to be equally true because all are equally in the dark--an astonishingly fallacious inference.

Now we must keep in mind that all of this really has nothing to do with pluralism as a social principle. We have already pointed out that pluralism, the rejection of social force to suppress divergent opinions or practices, does not mean that we concede all views to be equally right. Nor does it mean that they are all equally wrong, and therefore have an equal right to exist.

"Inclusivism" stabs at the heart of Christian faith, which claims that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. This claim is either true or it is not, just as God either created life on earth or not. And it matters a great deal what the truth is here and whether or not we believe it. As Christians we cannot just say: "Anything goes." And we most certainly are not saying that when we stand up for the right of all groups to be free of social suppression of their beliefs.

Finally, Christians in a pluralistic society, where there is no presumption in favor of their beliefs or practices, but perhaps a strong bias against, are in the very best position to show the true excellence of the Way of Christ. When Elijah called the prophets of Baal to the contest on Mount Carmel, he gave them every advantage that could be given. And when it came his turn to call for fire from heaven to consume his sacrifice, he had his altar and sacrifice flooded three times over with water before he prayed. The "disadvantage" of the water proved to be no problem for Jehovah, who answered by fire to consume the sacrifice.

Things have not much changed. Our Mount Carmel may be our university, or our business or profession, and the floods of social discrimination may flow against us. This is only to make all the more obvious, to those with eyes to see, that God is with us, and that the life of His resurrected Son is effectual in every dimension of our existence. We welcome our life in a pluralistic society as the very condition most favorable to our own sure knowledge of God, as our aspirations and our accomplishments testify that He is the one at work in us to will as well as to do the good things He desires for His world.