

# Can't We All Worship Together?

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## **The Ethos of Pluralism**

Around the corner from our house in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) stood a large Buddhist temple. On full moon days the smell of incense burning in front of idols was inescapable. Worshipers streamed past our house on their way to the temple. What did they do there? Some of them cried to the Buddha for light, help and relief from misery. Others simply meditated. In theory, Buddhists do not pray to a supreme deity. But atheism invariably leads to polytheism and the worship of various spirits. Our neighbors never left the temple without dropping a few coins in the "god boxes" in the courtyard. For me, the saddest sight was that of Buddhist mothers showing their children how to pray to the Buddha, and to show respect to various gods whose "favor" might be helpful.

In my Saturday morning catechism classes, I regularly discussed with the church's boys and girls the uniqueness of Christian prayer and worship. Christians were a small minority in the country, and most of their schoolmates were Buddhists or Hindus. To them, Q&A 117 of the Heidelberg Catechism was intensely relevant: "How does God want us to pray so that he will listen to us? First, we must pray from the heart to no other than the one true God, who has revealed himself in his Word...." On that foundation the Reformed Church of Sri Lanka had survived on the island for more than 300 years. It had not succumbed to the religious syncretism that was rampant in society at large. For the church to resist the allure of syncretism, the children needed to be well instructed in Christian doctrine and practice.

## **Pluralism in America**

In the past forty years, enormous changes have occurred in the religious landscape of North America. Religious icons from our Judeo-Christian heritage still linger. We see "In God we trust" on our coins, "One nation under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, and Bible verses on frescoes in government buildings and on the Liberty Bell. But all the while, Americans are casting aside the traditional ethos that was shaped by Judeo-Christian religious and ethical tradition. In its place has come the ethos of pluralism, an ever deepening mindset that denies all religious and moral absolutes, particularly those of Christianity. As Harold Netland points out in his book *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and*

*Mission* (IVP, 2001), the traditional links between Christianity and Western culture are coming loose. Christian teachings and standards are increasingly attacked while other religions are praised and promoted.

### **The Ethos of Pluralism**

Religious *diversity* is not the problem in America or anywhere else. Christianity was born, after all, into a religiously diverse world and soon learned how to survive and grow in a pluralistic environment. Over the centuries Christian missionaries have carried the gospel to people of every religion under the sun. Today, the global church is composed of people drawn from every culture and religious background, and the church is growing fastest in places where religious diversity is most common (See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. Oxford, 2002). The plain truth is that most Christians have never known anything else but religious pluralism and have been surrounded by non-Christian faiths. Obviously, religious diversity, per se, is not the issue. To understand the issue we must distinguish between the pluralism of diversity, which is the common experience of many Christians around the world, and the ethos of pluralism, which is a very different matter. By "ethos" we mean a deeply held viewpoint that affects the character and direction of people's thinking on moral, religious and practical matters. It is the ethos of pluralism that threatens the foundations of Christianity in America. People who have this mindset laud "tolerance," but are vigorously intolerant of anyone who insists on one God, one Savior, one Scripture, and one way to God the Father.

The ethos of pluralism represents a major change with respect to how Americans generally think about Christianity and where it stands vis-a-vis other religions. The new ethos assumes a basic parity between religions and essential agreement as to what they teach about God, the human condition, prayer, worship and, ultimately, salvation. Pluralism becomes for them a distinctive way of looking at religious diversity. They do not view religious diversity as a result of the fall and the choice of sinners to worship something other than the one true God (Romans 1:18-23), but as something good, to be embraced enthusiastically.

Christians inclined toward pluralism have no problem joining on special occasions with followers of other religions in public prayer and worship. Their actions implicitly deny the exclusivity found in the church's confession: We believe that we have no access to God except through the one and only Mediator and Intercessor, Jesus Christ the Righteous. He was made man, uniting together the divine and human natures, so that we human beings might have access to the divine Majesty. Otherwise we would have no access (The Belgic Confession, Article 26).

Major denominations in Europe and America capitulated to the ethos of pluralism long ago and it is now making inroads among evangelicals. Wherever pluralism goes it undermines faith in the gospel, the authority of the Bible, and the need for missions and evangelism. In fact, pluralism calls into question the legitimacy of missions and evangelism. I was made aware of this after delivering an address on Christian missions at an interdenominational gathering. In my presentation I described the basic differences between the Christian worldview and the worldviews of other faiths. I explained the different "salvations" each

promises, and how the differences come to expression in rituals, prayer and worship. I tried to be accurate to the point where clerics of other religions could not honestly accuse me of being unfair.

Following the address, a man came toward me and I could see fire in his eyes. He vigorously disagreed with what I had said, not because of any inaccuracy in my description of other religions, but because I had dared to say that on vital points I considered them wrong. They aren't wrong, he said, just different. All religions lead sincere people to the same place, whatever that "place" may be. Religious absolutes only cause trouble. His parting jab was something to the effect that missionaries are narrow-minded bigots.

### **Roots and challenges of pluralism**

Where did the ideology of pluralism come from? How are Christians sucked into it? To find the answer requires that we reflect on a number of developments in Western society. Moral values based on Christian convictions have been eroding for some time. In mainline churches the authority of the Bible has been marginalized and convictions about things that Christians have embraced since the days of the apostles have been set aside. Secularism, meaning life without reference to God, has established itself in the West. This has occurred at the very time when, due to immigration and globalization, people have become more aware of cultural and religious diversities.

The ethos of pluralism spreads among church people when two conditions are prevalent: (1) widespread ignorance of, or indifference toward, important biblical doctrines; and (2) increased awareness of the wider world of religious ideas, whether through study, travel, the Internet, or the arrival in our schools and neighborhoods of religionists from distant places. Both of these conditions can be plainly seen in the West. Even in traditionally orthodox churches, doctrine has been downplayed to the point where most members are unsure of what their church teaches, and many don't care. Moreover, in 1965, the Congress of the United States passed a new immigration law that opened the door to a greater number of immigrants and to groups from every part of the world.

British historian Andrew Walls has described the immigration law of 1965 as "the most important piece of legislation of the 20th century in terms of its effects on the church in North America." It increased the non-Christian segment of the population, brought new mission fields to our doorstep and increased the number of ethnic minority churches. It introduced ordinary Americans to new people from around the world with different values, lifestyles and religions. It also fed the ethos of pluralism that was already growing in western society.

The challenges are many, and they demand clear thinking. On the social and political level, "older" and "newer" immigrants are all citizens of the same country and share equally the rights and privileges of our democracy. The first challenge is to accept people who are different than ourselves, respect them as fellow human beings, live in peace and work together for the common good. The second challenge is to "show and tell" the gospel by word and deed, with prayer that those who now serve idols will turn to the true God and the

one Mediator, Jesus Christ. The third challenge is to recognize the insidious nature of religious syncretism and resist societal pressures to compromise with it.

### **Learning from other Christians**

I write this piece for the Forum from New Haven, Connecticut, where my wife and I are living in a community of thirty Christian leaders drawn from Asia, Africa and Latin America. Last evening, I discussed the subject of religious pluralism with some of them. They emphasized three things. First, religious diversity is nothing new to them; they have lived with it for centuries, and American Christians could benefit from lessons they learned the hard way. Second, Christians proclaim or deny the gospel both by words and actions, and when church leaders line up with representatives of non-Christian religions for joint prayer and worship they send an altogether wrong message. Third, the teaching of Scripture, Old Testament and New, is plain and consistent: theological pluralism has deadly consequences for God's people.

### **This isn't a "fad"**

This subject should not be dismissed as a passing fad. Religious pluralism is shaping up as the number one challenge to biblical Christianity in the 21st century. The issues it raises strike at the heart of our faith and mission - Who is God? Who is Christ? How are we to pray to God? What separates true religion from idolatry? On what basis can sinners be reconciled to God? What is our source of authority on religious and moral matters? What is our duty toward followers of other religions? The answers to these fundamental questions separate Christianity from all other religions.

I think again of the children in my catechism class years ago in Sri Lanka. I hear from some of them from time to time. They all married Christians, and as far as I know remain firm in the faith. But if somehow I had conveyed to them the ethos of pluralism, where might they be today? Pluralism is like cancer. It starts small, and it may spread slowly. But in the end it will kill you if not removed. Some people regard a pluralist approach as a gentler, friendlier kind of Christianity, but it ends up being a new religion. I'm glad I taught the children the difference.

Editor's Note:

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