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THE PROFILE OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

In the early part of the 17th century, Puritans in the Massachusetts Bay Colony called Rhode Island “the sewer of New England.” How did the young colony earn such scorn? It was willing to harbor fleeing religious dissidents like Roger Williams, who advocated a strict separation from the Church of England, and Anne Hutchinson, who claimed to receive special revelations from the Holy Spirit. Williams fortified the Puritans’ sour estimate of him when he eventually embraced complete religious toleration for people in the colony, including Jews and Muslims.³⁰

Almost four centuries later in Nashville, Joyce Jackson appeared on the front page of the *Tennessean’s* religion section. Jackson is a member of the Baha’i faith, and the article depicted her as a symbol of religious diversity in Nashville as well as the entire United States. Baha’i teaches that there is only one God and one human family, and that all religions are spiritually united—a creed that would cause the Puritans to roll over in their graves.³¹ Reflecting the current pluralistic mood, the article assumed that both Jackson and Baha’i are as much a part of America’s religious mosaic as are Nashville’s Methodists and Baptists.³²

DEFINITIONS

The basic meaning of *pluralism* is something that exists in more than one form—the condition of being plural. We are focusing on a specific form of pluralism—religious. Sociologist Peter Berger defines *religious pluralism* as the “wide variety of religious and other reality-defining agencies that compete” for people’s allegiance today.³³ This definition gets us started but doesn’t go far enough. So far we have described religious pluralism mainly as religious diversity, but it is crucial to understand that for many it includes much more. For many people, religious pluralism is also an ideology, a philosophy regarding how religious diversity *ought* to be understood. The basic concept has been around for centuries, but in recent decades it has expanded into a popular field of study and attracted an entire throng of devoted researchers,

writers, sociologists, and theologians—many referring to themselves as “religious pluralists.” One such researcher, D. A. Carson, describes religious pluralism as a set of ideas that insist that tolerance *must* be granted to all religions because none of them can justifiably claim to be “the true one.”³⁴ Religious pluralists claim that this position *ought* to be promoted by all open-minded and culturally sensitive people.³⁵ They argue that because of intrinsic limitations, no set of religious beliefs can legitimately claim to be the standard for assessing other sets of religious beliefs.

It’s not that people who buy into the ideology of religious pluralism discount the importance of religion. Just the opposite. Most religious pluralists believe strongly in the importance of religion, but this belief is coupled with the conviction that each religion is valid and should be respected. Maybe some sort of absolute truth unifies the many religions; maybe it doesn’t. But for religious pluralists, that’s beside the point. Their critical point is that no single religion possesses truth in such measure that it can challenge the legitimacy of other religions. According to their ideology, the missionary who sets off for Thailand to convert Buddhists to the Christian faith is a Neanderthal in the evolution of religious sensitivity. Proponents of religious pluralism believe that no single religion holds the secret to salvation. A person who thinks otherwise is considered by them to be something of an oppressive hayseed.

According to the ideology of religious pluralism, religions are both formed and limited by their cultural and historical locations. In other words, the truth of your religion is limited to the confines of your community. It is “true” to the extent that it helps your community find answers to fundamental questions and pathways to salvation. A particular religious story may energize, guide, and define you and your community, but beyond your religion’s city limits, it is not binding on anyone else. Each religion is limited by the religion next door, and you must adhere to the No Soliciting sign posted on your neighbors’ front doors.

This ideological stance is comparable to my penchant for chocolate. Chocolate ice cream has a tremendous hold on me, but I recognize that it does not have the same hold on other people. My wife, for example, craves strawberry ice cream, and I would be foolish to try to convince her that chocolate ice cream is superior. It’s a matter of taste. No matter how significant chocolate is to me—especially when you add almonds into the mix—its powers are lost on nonchocololics.

Keep in mind that no matter how popular the claims regarding religious

pluralism may be, they are just that—claims. The ideology of religious pluralism has behind it the weight of strong public opinion, particularly in the West and in other secularized nations such as Japan. But no matter how strong the public opinion, it doesn't verify the ideology of religious pluralism. Had the strength of opinion carried the day, the Christian faith would have died in its cradle. No matter how offensive some people may consider the New Testament claims regarding Jesus Christ,³⁶ their aversion is no reason to overrule what the living God has chosen to do in His Son. The Early Church confronted widespread ridicule of the gospel and went on proclaiming Christ as Lord anyway.

OUR MODEL: THE EARLY CHURCH

Responding to religious pluralism is nothing new for Christians. "How should we proclaim the gospel of Christ in our world?" is a question the Church has raised since the first century. The Early Church was keenly aware of the competing religious claims vying for acceptance. Those initial Christians could have presented the gospel as one more religious alternative in an already crowded marketplace. They could have carved out a niche for their story and left it at that.

But this was not an option for the apostles and other Christian leaders we meet in the New Testament. They believed that, in Jesus Christ, God had accomplished something involving all people, nations, cultures, and times. The birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus were universally important. Paul told Timothy that God our Savior "desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all" (1 Tim. 2:4-6). On the Day of Pentecost, when the promised Holy Spirit was given to the Church, the nations were represented. They heard the good news in their own languages. Peter told them the universal reign of God was present in the risen Christ. The Holy Spirit was now confirming that Jesus is the Redeemer of the world (Acts 2:1-13).

The Church itself, the New Testament says, is a sign that God is now drawing all things into unity through Christ Jesus. Paul made a statement—radical at the time—that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female" because all people are "one in Christ" (Gal. 3:28, NIV). Through Him and by the Spirit, the Father is now reconciling "to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (Col. 1:20).

Consider the dichotomy within the ragtag bunch we know as Jesus' first disciples. At one end of the spectrum was Matthew, a Jew who, before Jesus called him, collected taxes for the Roman Empire. His job would have publicly marked him as a sinner and invited the Pharisees' scorn. At the other end was Simon the Zealot (not to be confused with Simon Peter). The surname "Zealot" identifies Simon as someone who rigorously observed all aspects of Jewish law and, consequently, would have viewed Matthew with religious contempt. Yet Jesus called both men to be His disciples. In Him they found common ground—breaking bread together and later proclaiming the gospel in the power of the Spirit (Acts 5:31-33). Out of this kind of diversity, Paul said, God in Christ has created one new humanity (Eph. 2:15).

If the first Christians' beliefs regarding God's universal deed in Christ were true, then other religious stories that claimed to be adequate independent of Christ were false. Peter wrote to young Christians who had recently left Greco-Roman religions and cults and said Christ had "ransomed [them] from the futile ways inherited from [their] ancestors" (1 Pet. 1:18). Paul left no doubt regarding the implications of the Christian gospel for other religions. "Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Cor. 8:5-6).

The New Testament simply and consistently permits no plurality of creators and redeemers. There is only one—the sovereign God revealed through Jesus Christ. People can reject the New Testament's message as hopelessly parochial, outdated, and erroneous, but they cannot successfully integrate it into a compilation of religions.

THE FIRST-CENTURY "MARKETPLACE" OF RELIGIONS

Earlier, we heard Alan Race describe the 21st-century scene as a "marketplace of religious possibilities." In it religions "jostle with each other," competing for attention from "shoppers."³⁷ Race could just as easily have been describing the 1st-century Greco-Roman world into which the gospel was born. It, too, resembled a crowded marketplace spilling over with religious wares. The options were almost unlimited. In the first century, separation of religion and state as we know it today was unimaginable, and "nothing in public life was undertaken without first seeking to determine whether the enterprise enjoyed divine favor."³⁸ In addition to free food, jugglers, magicians, speeches,

and so forth, local celebrations included sacrifice to the local deities. Except for the Jews, worship of one God who trivialized all other so-called gods was nonexistent.

The closest thing approaching a world religion was the religion of imperial Rome—the imperial cult, established under the reigns of both Julius Caesar (100-44 B.C.) and Caesar Augustus (63 B.C.-A.D. 14).³⁹ Augustus declared himself lord and savior of the whole world. He established his own cult and the cult of the goddess Pax (the Roman goddess of peace) in Rome and throughout the empire. The universal reign of the Peace of Rome (the Pax Romana) was thought to be willed by the gods and was expected to last forever. People believed that the empire's grandeur verified these beliefs. Accepting the imperial religion by worshiping the gods of the state⁴⁰ was expected of everyone, and refusing to do so was considered treasonous. At the same time, the Romans assumed that every nation they conquered had its own god(s) and did not interfere with the national religious practices of these groups.⁴¹

With the primacy of the Roman state religion in place, the religion of imperial Rome could make room for many other gods and lords. This held so long as they accepted Roman rule and superiority⁴² and “so long as they remained merely local, personal or private, and made no counter claims about universal truth and world dominion. Ultimately all gods and lords would have to serve and sustain the cause of the Roman Empire.” This made the religion of imperial Rome the “world religion” of the day.⁴³ No wonder John the Revelator proclaimed that the Incarnate God who is Lord of all could never be successfully folded into that arrangement.

At the heart of every imperial city were temples and shrines dedicated to Augustus Caesar or some other emperor, and one or more of the Greek and Roman deities who had willed Rome's worldwide reign. Cities such as Ephesus, where emperor worship began in 29 B.C., competed for permission to build temples to the emperors. Residents of Ephesus devoted themselves to Artemis, a cosmic queen who mediated between individuals and their fate.⁴⁴ In Corinth, citizens visited the sanctuary of Asclepius, the god of healing, to seek relief from their aches and pains.⁴⁵ They also frequented the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, where hundreds of sacred prostitutes served the male worshipers. And the Athenians were so addicted to worshiping gods that they had erected an altar to an unnamed god—just in case someone didn't know which god to thank or appease (Acts 17:22-23).

Besides the more traditional and official deities, numerous newer reli-

gions known as mystery religions had emerged. To feed the masses' religious hunger, mystery religions promised salvation, community, and communion with deity. People were initiated through secret rites, and as they came to understand the mysteries, they were redeemed. Mystery religions offered ecstasy and supreme visions to ordinary folk and, not surprisingly, enjoyed enormous appeal.⁴⁶ As if this were not enough, the empire was also well-stocked with "religious associations, seers and oracles, magicians and astrologers, miracle workers and philosophers." The whole cosmos was thought to be saturated by gods and evil spirits.⁴⁷

People freely mixed religions and formed strains that were unique to a particular city, region, or populace. Augustine described how pagans would take popular religious stories and combine them "with their sacred rites and ceremonies."⁴⁸ We call such mixing syncretism. Gnosticism, which borrowed freely from Christianity, was an example of this. Jesus Christ played a very important role in Gnosticism, but He was completely reengineered and converted into a lesser being by the time the Gnostics were through with Him.

So the first-century Greco-Roman world was a religious alphabet soup—you could move a spoon around and spell almost anything. And people were free to embrace numerous religions without contradicting their allegiance to any of them. The Roman Empire expected the religions to respect one another. So long as Christians were considered a sect of the Jews, they were protected by Roman recognition of the Jews as a religion. But once that identity was stripped away, they became the ultimate "outsiders"; they simply did not fit into the multicolored picture we have described and so were persecuted for numerous reasons.⁴⁹ They would not submit to the requirements of the imperial cult. They would not endorse and participate in the assumed religious diversity and tolerance, because they would not permit their Christ to become just another player on the religious stage. They absolutely would not have Him bow before the gods of Rome. And they would not attend the temples and shrines dedicated to the emperors.⁵⁰ Christianity didn't even look like a religion because it didn't constitute a single ethnic group, such as the Jews. Consequently, Christians could not celebrate ancestral rites in a temple presided over by priests. They could not even show their critics an image of the Christ they claimed to worship. If ever there were a bunch of atheists who posed a grave threat to social order, Christians fit the bill.⁵¹ Additionally, Christians were so diverse they couldn't even constitute a *collegium*, a legal organization of people who shared common characteristics such as place of origin, occupation, or

an interest in the theater or athletics. When groups met that had no such common ties, the Romans suspected they were meeting for troublesome political reasons. To top it off, public activities included the worship of local deities, but the standoffish Christians would not participate. So they earned from their pagan neighbors the contemptuous label, “haters of the human race.”⁵²

In this eclectic and fluid atmosphere, the young Christian Church proclaimed Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The odds stacked against Christians make their faithfulness all the more remarkable. The Church had to guard against those who wanted to blend foreign elements with the gospel. Paul’s letter to the Christians in Colossae chastised the false teachers who told young Christians to worship other beings in addition to worshiping Christ, claiming that only then would they be complete (Col. 2:8-23). Opportunities to corrupt the gospel waited at every turn, but the apostles worked tirelessly and tenaciously to protect its integrity.

DÉJÀ VU

“Like our sisters and brothers in the other Neopagan movements, we’re polytheistic Nature worshipers, attempting to revive the best aspects of the Paleopagan⁵³ faiths of our ancestors within a modern scientific, artistic, ecological, and holistic context. Like our predecessors and namesakes the Druids, we’re people who believe in excellence—physically, intellectually, artistically, and spiritually.”

With some modification, this statement could pass for one of the first-century religious options. Instead, it appears on the Web site of the neo-pagan Druids, just one of many forms of neo-paganism—religious movements attempting to revive ancient pagan religions—that are currently thriving in Europe and North America.⁵⁴ The similarity between the century into which the gospel was born and ours is striking. Then as now, many religions share the same political and social spaces. Names and forms have changed, but the phenomenon remains much the same.

One major distinction between the Church in the first century and our situation today is that the Early Church had no part in shaping Mediterranean culture the way Christianity has shaped the West.⁵⁵ Ironically, this distinction makes our mission both easier and more difficult. On the bright side, many people are already somewhat familiar with the Christian story and its values. The Christian faith can point to many justifiable reasons for saying it has richly benefited humanity, such as widespread affirmation of the dignity and worth

of each person. This value, so deeply enshrined in Western democratic institutions, is incomprehensible apart from what philosopher Alfred N. Whitehead called “the Galilean vision” that extended the good news of God’s love to all people—no exceptions.⁵⁶

On the other hand, we also have to contend with a darker side of Christianity’s involvement in society. Muslims rightly remember the oppression the Crusades spawned. Jews remember a long history of anti-Semitism. Many people in lands once colonized by European “Christians” recall a legacy of exploitation and dismissal of their cultures. Musa Dube quotes an African proverb that pointedly makes this clear. “When the missionaries came, we had the land and they had the Bible. When the missionaries left, they had the land and we had the Bible.”⁵⁷ Women recall how the Bible and Christianity have often been used to deny them both a full-fledged place at the table of human dignity and the Pentecostal promise of their ministry in Christ’s Church.

Those who sally forth into a pluralistic world in Christ’s name while ignoring the mixed Christian record will go ill prepared. They should not be surprised if they repeat longstanding errors and obstruct rather than communicate the gospel of liberation.

Today, in the presence of other religions, Christians must confront the history of a relationship between church and culture that has often compromised their witness. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer signaled so clearly, our task of disengaging from a pagan culture is quite different from the task of the Early Church. In the West we have so often allowed the world’s political and economic powers to shape the gospel that we must now relearn the difference between the two.⁵⁸ Think of how easily some of us equate the gospel’s success with our church budgets and membership numbers, ignoring the clear New Testament teaching that the way of discipleship is the way of the Cross. Many Christians who live under persecution are puzzled by our simplistic equation. Some Christians act as though the gospel of Jesus Christ is in danger if the secular state doesn’t back it. At a time when the Nazis were persecuting faithful German Christians, Bonhoeffer asked, “How much space must the church have?” He answered, “Only as much space as it takes to faithfully proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

We must also candidly confront a history where, in the name of Christ, Christians have often cooperated with political powers to subdue and convert

people of other religions. Our use of “unholy alliances” must be confessed, regardless of whether other religions have done the same.⁵⁹

Another distinction 21st-century Christians face in their mission is the prevalence of mixing Christian beliefs with ideas contrary to the Scriptures and the creeds, known as syncretism. Tendencies toward syncretism have existed since the first century, as we previously noted. But today, in the absence of any kind of church council control, syncretism is rampant. Given this, we should not be surprised if the term *Christian* seems ambiguous to many.

On a daily basis, 15 to 20 million viewers in at least 133 countries hang on every word of a modern-day syncretist—Oprah Winfrey, host of the highest-rated show in television history. She was raised in a Baptist church in Mississippi, and though she is quick to express appreciation for her Christian background, along the way Winfrey concluded that Christianity as she knew it was too hung up on the notion of a jealous God. “Come on—let’s get over it!” she was quoted as saying in an article titled “The Gospel According to Oprah.” And get over it she has. The God to which the Baptists introduced Winfrey has taken on revised characteristics. “Oprah’s clothes may bear labels,” Marcia Nelson says admiringly, “but her faith does not.”⁶⁰ Her gospel doesn’t require specific “doctrinal commitments or a community.”⁶¹ On her show, Oprah identifies God as “the FORCE.” God doesn’t have an ego problem, Winfrey said, so He doesn’t care what you call Him. If you believe in a rhythm of nature and in love, then you believe in God.⁶²

Winfrey is not alone in her stance. After participating in Christian services on Sunday—complete with scripture reading and confession of the Nicene Creed—a considerable number of Christians will engage in Buddhist or Hindu practices later in the week. They will read books that identify and explain the role of cosmic powers, and they harmonize all of this with the confessions they make on Sunday. Tying up loose ends is not essential when it comes to syncretism as long as it makes sense to you or your community.

Even recognized religions have sprouted from syncretism. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is one example; the Baha’i faith to which Joyce Jackson belongs is another. Baha’i draws from Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and an astonishing mix of other religions. Though Jackson was raised Southern Baptist, at age 19 she became a member of the Baha’i faith. Why? Because she “longed for a closer connection to Christ and his teachings.” Jackson said that she “wasn’t getting what she needed from Christianity in

general." But, she said, in Baha'i she found answers for her questions.⁶³ Author Bill Easum labels this kind of syncretism "designer faith."⁶⁴

Syncretism also rears its dangerous head in more inconspicuous ways. Christian missionary and church historian Floyd Cunningham is baffled by one of his brightest Protestant seminary graduates who avoids a particular tree when he returns to his hometown because he believes a spirit inhabits it. Cunningham also knows of one Protestant church that refused to disturb a termite mound because the congregants were certain that dwendes, or spirit-dwarfs, lived there. "On an intellectual level," Cunningham observes, "most of these Christians would be reluctant to recognize anything good in another religion."⁶⁵

The error of syncretism isn't limited to the spirit realm. If we aren't careful, we Christians can attach so much significance to a political party or country that it begins to assume religious qualities. This happened openly during World War II when many German Christians tried to mix Christianity with National Socialism (Nazism). Their mantra was: "Germany the end, Christ the means!"

Christians also need to pause before jumping on the latest self-improvement bandwagons. Some books, for example, to which Christians give almost addictive attention, even some that claim to be Christian, actually compete with orthodox Christian faith. Recognizing syncretism is often a case of specks *versus* logs; it's easier to spot in someone else than in ourselves.

Just as the Early Church found ways to tell and faithfully live the story of God in its pluralistic setting, so must we. And just as the Holy Spirit empowered and gave wisdom to the early Christians, so will He empower us today. The resurrected Christ, who was Lord over the Church and the world then, is still Lord of lords now. One day, every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus alone is the Christ, to the glory of God the Father. For there is but "one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:6).

For Reflection and Discussion

1. Explore and discuss the amazing diversity of religious options by using the links at <<http://www.pluralism.org/resources/links/index.php>>.
2. What is the difference between the fact of religious pluralism and the ideology of religious pluralism? Why is the distinction important?
3. Practically, what would be required for Christians to live as counterculturally as did the first-century Christians? Are there historical factors that limit our ability to bear witness as they did?

4. What are some of the ways in which Christians have in the past and in the present exhibited conduct that obstructs the gospel?
5. Syncretism can take many forms, both open and subtle. What are some of its current expressions in your culture and within the Christian church?