



Edited by Dan

uncomfortable

BOONE

conversations



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CHRISTIANS

in the

PUBLIC ARENA

by Dan Boone

Many of us grew up in a world dominated by a Christian perspective on marriage, the sanctity of life, war, poverty, human sexuality, gambling, illegal drugs, and human rights. It is historically true that the Judeo-Christian ethic is woven into the laws of our nation. As the decades have rolled on, our nation has slowly redefined its legal understanding of many of these issues. The church no longer occupies the dominant seat at the table of culture, and in the minds of many, the church is part of the problem.

Ross Douthat writes in *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*, “No aspect of Christian faith is less appealing to contemporary sensibilities than the faith’s long list of ‘thou shalt nots,’ and no prohibition attracts more exasperation and contempt than the Christian view of chastity and sex.”¹ Our once dominant opinion, and the way we have sought to enact it in culture, are no longer welcomed. Our religious-right groups, political pacts, and right-wing causes have convinced the public that the church is no longer a defender of equal rights for all. And, like it or not, having an evangelical in the White House has not seemed to make much difference.

This is the reality we live in today. Each presidential election in the United States brings its own fresh wave of people who promise to take our country back, restore morality, defend the family, etc. But the pudding has not had

1. Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 288.

much proof in it. While the Christian voting block is still a major player in elections, that vote is itself becoming more and more divided.

We live in a world of preferred diversities. Popular opinion and pressure seem to indicate which diversities are acceptable and which aren't. Examples abound. Syrian refugees. LGBT identifiers. Undocumented immigrants. The right-to-carry-arms crowd. Black Lives Matter activists. Right wing. Left wing. Libertarians. Death with dignity. Tea Party. The Green Movement. All of these have been in the national spotlight. Each has its fans and critics. We call this pluralism, which means there are many reality-defining narratives to which groups of people pledge their devotion.

Lest we forget, this so-called new reality sounds familiar when juxtaposed with historic documents. Our First Amendment says, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance." This declaration was adopted on December 10, 1948, by the General Assembly of the United Nations, and has become a guiding principle for governments around the world.

Justice Potter Stewart once penned, "What our Constitution indispensably protects is the freedom of each of us, be [we] Jew or Agnostic, Christian or Atheist, Buddhist or Freethinker, to believe or disbelieve, to worship or not worship, to pray or keep silent, according to his own conscience, uncoerced, and unrestrained by government."²

So where does the Christian stand today in the public arena? As one demanding a seat of power and privilege? As the assumed dominant voice? As one voice among many working toward the common good for all people of all faiths and non-faiths? As a minority opinion? As a silent group that has taken its marbles and gone home because it could not force its will on others? As a persecuted position? As an angry electorate championing the most bombastic? As a retreating community who withdraws from the scene as a quiet note of opposition? As fighters who enter the fray and take all the ground they can in

2. From Justice Stewart's dissenting opinion in *Abington v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 203 (1963), 319–20.

a culture war? I know believers who espouse each of these options, and they are all passionate about their chosen public expressions.

How does the church enter the cultural conversation in a world of pluralism? My role as president of Trevecca Nazarene University often places me squarely in the middle of this dilemma. I live in a place where church and government collide, and many of my colleagues, as well as the government, seem to have trouble discerning where exactly the blurry line should be drawn.

Wheaton College is under fire for seeking to dismiss a professor who declared that Christians and Muslims worship the same God. Gordon College, along with Carson Newman and others, took heat for seeking an exemption that would allow them to hire persons who agreed with their statement of faith. Notre Dame has filed for exemption from federal requirements regarding the provision of pregnancy-ending medications for their employees in the university health program. Two Christian colleges withdrew from the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities so they could expand their hiring practices to include individuals in monogamous, same-sex relationships while two others withdrew from the same organization because a decision to evict the withdrawing colleges was not made swiftly enough.

Christians on public college campuses are also in the news. San Diego State University and Vanderbilt University have withdrawn official, on-campus recognition from religious groups because they discriminated by requiring their members to embrace a statement of faith. At the same time, other public universities are championing the diversity that Christian groups provide on their campuses. Ohio State has declared that “a student organization formed to foster or affirm the sincerely held religious beliefs of its members may adopt eligibility criteria for its Student Officers that are consistent with those beliefs.”³ The University of Michigan got embroiled in a controversy over why it shut down an InterVarsity Christian Fellowship campus club. The university denied allegations that the shutdown was due to the club being accused of discrimination (over its policy of not admitting LGBT members), and instead stated that it was a paperwork filing issue. A university spokesperson issued the following statement about the group: “Their existence and their voices add significantly to our academic community and support those students who find solace, camaraderie, and guidance in their presence.”⁴

3. <http://www.intervarsity.org/page/campus-challenges>. Last accessed April 14, 2016.

4. <http://www.christianpost.com/news/michigan-university-denies-it-removed-intervarsity-from-campus-89365/>. Last accessed April 14, 2016.

Whether in the private Christian university or the public university, it appears that there is a wide diversity of opinion regarding the definition and practice of the freedom of religion. The United States Constitution champions what is being called *civic pluralism*, a concept that guarantees freedom to Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, atheists, and none-of-the-aboves to believe, worship, and live according to the dictates of their faith as long as that right is not forced upon others. This generous guarantee of freedom means that Christianity is not in a privileged civic position. This fact is a hard thing to swallow for many Christians who have gotten used to the privilege the church has enjoyed and exercised in our nation's history. The political "take our nation back" movement gets much of its octane from a desire to have a preferred faith controlling Capitol Hill. I understand this desire; after all, it's easy to support someone we morally agree with—but it is not what the First Amendment says.

However, the broad guarantee of religious freedom and the check on Christian privilege does not mean that secularism is in the driver's seat either. It isn't. And in any case, we should not be strangers in this kind of world. Most of the New Testament was written in the context of Christianity being a minority voice, without privilege. Our sacred Scriptures know their way around in a pluralistic culture where other religions and voices are dominant.

Enshrined in our Constitution is the concept of a government that does not *establish* a religion but provides for *freedom* of religion. We are a model for the world of religious pluralism. The Old Testament idea of Israel's king being the son of God, a messianic figure, is neither assumed nor written into our Constitution. Rather, our founders imagined a world in which religious liberties would thrive. In this world called America, faith-based institutions have been pivotal in establishing our great universities as well as other notable enterprises like Alcoholics Anonymous, the YMCA, and the Red Cross.

Certainly, there is far too much mean-spirited ugliness that has marched under the banner of Jesus. The church is, undeniably, a broken institution operating in a broken world. The church is not exempt from the gracious redemption of God that it preaches for humankind. Within the body of Christ we seek to practice a charitable diversity.

The anger of religious people in the political arena has done more to discredit the gospel of Jesus than any good they have done by getting their way. If we are living in a world of pluralism, let's strive to be civic pluralists, peaceful pluralists, common-good pluralists. Striving for pluralism does not mean we compromise or water down our distinctiveness. Like every diverse group, we are known as different because of our devotion to a particular way of life.

As we champion our own religious liberties, let's also agree that others deserve the same liberties we request for ourselves—even if we strongly disagree with their religious or personal practices and beliefs. For instance, though the distance between the LGBT community and the Christian church is vast, could we not speak on behalf of their right to be treated with dignity rather than bullying, the right to housing and inheritance, their right to earn an income? We should be able to agree that, as humans, regardless of whether we approve of their behavior, they deserve the same rights and privileges the rest of us enjoy. Certainly we may disagree over the symbolic and legal definitions of marriage. But those with whom we disagree have a right to champion their definitions in the same way that we have the right to champion ours.

To be locked in a culture war with only winners and losers is not supposed to be the way of Christians. Our goal should not be to run a political establishment or take over a country. Our mission is the redeeming message of Jesus. We should only be asking for the freedom to believe, worship, share, and practice our faith, that—without forcing it on them—others may understand the reality of the hope we find in Jesus. Christian success will not be measured by the results of who won a culture war. Christian success is measured by our ability to show our neighbors that we are loving, forgiving, serving, gracious, and humble followers of Jesus. Maybe we can be known once again for how we love rather than how we hate.

Our rootedness in Christian orthodox faith has filled the world with hospitals, schools, homes for unwanted children, shelters for the poor, refuge for the exiled, medicine and food for the developing world, and charity unlike any other faith. The church has, historically and globally, been good for the world. In the United States, Christian voices have been joined by other voices. Instead of fighting against these new voices, let's return to a New Testament perspective of the kingdom of God in a pluralistic culture. We don't have to be the loudest or the angriest in order to be heard. We have been granted the right to form communities and practice our faith in keeping with our understanding of God as revealed in the person of Jesus and the Scriptures. Let's invite any and all to join us but coerce no one.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you express your feelings about the moral direction of our nation? What emotion best defines your perspective? (Anger, sadness, determination, optimism, numbness?)
2. If you could articulate what you think the church most needs to do, what would be your stump speech?
3. How can you be a Christian and embrace pluralism as the way the government operates while maintaining your distinct faith?
4. How do you interpret the First Amendment? Does it restrict religion from the public square or protect religion from government overreach?
5. Does your church practice 1 Timothy 2:1–2?
6. What issue in your community should Christians express their voice on? What form would this take? Where would it happen?