

IN DEFENCE OF PLURALISM

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By Paul Lusk

A Muslim school gets state funding . . . a government minister 'comes out' as a lesbian . . . the future King wants to defend all 'faith', not just the Faith .

To many evangelicals, these reveal a political disorder requiring a revival of a 'Christian nation'. Others doubt this. How can we support persecuted Christians overseas yet deny equality to Muslims here? Can Christians dictate others' private lives, whatever their worldly duties? How should an unconverted prince respond to a destiny to head a 'church'?

These questions highlight challenges in today's 'pluralist' society. For students of politics, 'pluralism' is a system where groups with opposed ideas and interests can live as neighbours with equal opportunities in public life. 'Pluralists' believe this society can work. Opponents (notably, in our century, Marxists) see society as dominated by powerful groups, so all politics is a struggle to come out on top. But the peaceful fall of the Berlin wall and of apartheid are among recent dramas suggesting that pluralism may be the great survivor from 20th century struggles.

As we shall see, evangelicals founded the first modern pluralist societies. Pluralism - equal rights for all, irrespective of personal belief - guaranteed freedom from state interference.

Yet pluralism gets poor reviews in Christian circles. Don Carson's book *The Gagging of God* presents pluralism as the opponent of Christianity in contemporary culture. He thinks it denies our right to present gospel truth and run faithful churches.

His main attack is against 'philosophical pluralism'. This, he says, is the claim that 'no religion has the right to pronounce itself right or true'. Behind this theology is 'relativism'. To the relativist, all religious truth is personal and all beliefs held by individuals are equally 'true'. 'Post-modern' thought abandons truth-seeking in favour of 'deconstructing' belief. Don Carson is correct to identify this as post-modernism's way of shutting out the gospel, and his massive scholarship is well used in this effort.

But I think he is wrong to confuse this argument with the question of pluralism as a political force. Post-modern relativists do not accept a society which accommodates diverse beliefs. They reduce all convictions to variations on the same religious theme. Pluralists are different: they think we should foster a society where different worldviews find expression.

Historically, the great opponents of pluralism have been 'sacralists'. According to sacralism, society requires conformity to one religious position. Sacralists believe in state religion. The emperor Constantine introduced 'Christian' sacralism and the Roman Catholic Church maintained it. Leading Reformers - Luther, Zwingli and Calvin among them - promoted Protestant sacralist systems to govern church and state instead.

'Christian sacralists' face a serious problem. All members of society must bend to the official church - but believing Christians are usually a social minority. So the official 'church' includes a large number, probably a great majority, of unbelievers. From the 1520s, as the Reformation took hold, Protestant sacralism was resisted by 'independent' Christians whose churches accepted only believers as members. Sacralists thought the Bible gave the state power to compel conformity to one church. So Protestant sacralism persecuted independent churches, putting faithful believers to

death. To justify this, sacralists slandered free churches. Independent Christians married outside the state church, so sacralists called them fornicators. Independents denied churches were part of the state apparatus, so were called anarchists. Independents refused to conform to an unbiblical state church. So they were imprisoned, expelled and (often) executed as rebels against the Protestant state.

Christians who rejected sacralism founded a new kind of state. Roger Williams, pastor of the Salem church, was banished from Protestant Massachusetts in 1635, convicted of preaching that civil government had no right to control religion. Williams bought land from Indians to found Rhode Island, the first modern state to grant civil rights regardless of faith.

Later sacralist systems became 'tolerant'. They stopped persecuting dissenters, eventually admitting them to roughly equal status. Britain went this path, retaining an official 'church' under royal headship but drifting to liberal democracy. But 'tolerance' implies an official faith which chooses to 'tolerate' dissent.

Independents said the New Testament gave no right to 'Christians' to claim political dominance. Williams rejected 'tolerance' and founded his state instead on freedom of conscience. The role of this state is to enforce civil law, not impose beliefs. It confers equal rights on all - whether Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, atheists, or the ever-present congregation of the 'don't know, don't care'. It presumes political superiority for no group.

Freedom of conscience leads naturally to pluralism. It was the pluralism of Rhode Island, not the sacralism of Massachusetts, that shaped the US constitution. So, if you belong to an independent, evangelical church, your tradition invented pluralism, in principle and in practice.

This tradition interprets Scripture like this: Christians are, usually, a social minority. A Christian church comprises believers. Accepting faith is an individual matter for each conscience. Belonging to any social group - family, tribe, nation - does not make a Christian. Normal social groups include believers and non-believers, so members and non-members of churches.

This believing minority does not claim any political power or status for itself: quite the opposite. But Christians do not isolate themselves. They mingle in society with lifestyles showing the moral fruit of their worldview. They accept duties towards government, even though it is not 'Christian' government. However, the church has its leaders and internal discipline. These private matters do not concern the state. Christians only resist the state if it invades things reserved for conscience.

So Christianity is an exclusive minority faith seeking its place in an inclusive society. The sacralist mindset finds this unthinkable. But once the possibility of pluralism is understood, all falls into place. In a pluralist society, the free conscience seeks to win others not by binding all to a religious social order, but by mutual persuasion underpinned by guaranteed civil liberty.

Sacralists think social peace is possibly only if core religious values are agreed. The post-modern relativists are not pluralists. They are sacralists who say (i) society can only function on the basis of agreed faith and (ii) there is no agreed faith so (iii) any faith is acceptable only if it accommodates all other faiths.

The new sacralism of post-modern relativism will try to exclude Christians from debate. We should demand inclusion, not on the basis of a retreat into watered-down Protestant sacralism, but from a confident assertion of the benefits of pluralism.

Let's return to the examples. What do we think of 'gay' politicians? A Christian who is a pluralist will affirm the right of gays (like any sinner) to join national life, but defend our right to assert the biblical options of heterosexual marriage or celibacy as the choices for a faithful Christian lifestyle - and therefore binding on church officers and members.

A Christian sacralist may deny the civil rights of 'gays' to hold public office. A new-relativist sacralist may seek to deny us the right to speak publicly about homosexuality, and operate what we consider faithful Christian churches. Both positions are based on supposing that religious conformity is essential to social stability.

We can sympathise with the dilemma of the Prince of Wales. The man is supposed to 'defend' a faith he does not share - a hangover from the sacralist notion that the sword of the state enforces discipline among the unwilling hordes compelled to join the official church. Since when did God need 'defending' by Charles Windsor? But liberty of conscience is for the state to protect. So yes, HRH, defend all faith - if you mean a plural society where all have equal rights to believe or not.

The question of education is simpler to analyse yet more challenging to resolve. If the state funds denominational church schools, we cannot deny the same to Muslims and non-denominational Christians. We believe education needs a moral centre, so welcome a chance to promote independent Christian schools, without fees. But a Christian pluralist faces the question of where to draw the line. Pluralism does not mean 'anything goes'. If grants are made to Christians, Jews and Muslims, why not to racists and witches?

There is an essential debate about acceptable boundaries - and what a pluralist society must exclude. We should join this debate on the basis that we invented pluralism and excluding Christians is to banish the very essence of pluralistic democracy.

There will be risks in abandoning the old 'tolerant sacralist' position. Sacralism is easy to understand. Christian sacralism has appeal to unbelievers. Christian pluralism may not win friends in the world. The foundation of our position must be the Bible. I believe the New Testament vision of the faithful church leads us to resolve current puzzles in favour of social pluralism.

Further reading:

Don Carson's *The Gagging of God* was published by Apollos, Leicester, in 1996.

For the history of independent churches and their dispute with sacralism, see two books by Leonard Verduin: *The Reformers and their stepchildren* (1964) and *The anatomy of a hybrid* (1976), both published by Eerdmans.

For an insight into the British context late in the Reformation, a fascinating article by Iain Murray is 'The Scots at the Westminster Assembly' in *Banner of Truth Magazine*, issue 371-372, August - September 1994.

For non-Christian perspectives on pluralistic democracy today, and its differences with 'post-modernism', see Chantal Mouffe (editor): *Dimensions of radical democracy: pluralism, citizenship, community* published by Verso, London (1992).