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Religious Pluralism: Problems and Prospects

*Dr. J. Gordon Melton**

I. INTRODUCTION

I have spent much of the last thirty years mapping the religious life of the United States. This unique occupation began in graduate school with a dissertation problem—to discern the important structures in the American religious life. At the time (the 1960s) there was much talk of a post-denominational era, of ecumenism. The great ecumenical hope was fueled by mergers in the mission field. Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational, and even Anglican churches were joining together to create a new wave of “united Protestant” churches, gathering participation from churches in South Korea, Pakistan, Japan, and India. While most of these new united churches were Asian, one was close at hand—the United Church of Canada. Founded in 1925, this merger of Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Methodists seemed to be working well after fifty years.

Two factors separated American churches from the possibility of such ecumenical unions. In almost every case where such a united church had been formed, the merging churches were a distinct minority. First, in the United States, Protestantism was the majority religious factor. Second, while the Canadians were experiencing a union, the United States had gone through an intense religious controversy that split its major churches into warring theological camps. Such a split continues to this day and goes under various names—fundamentalist/modernist, conservative/liberal, evangelical/ecumenical. The dynamic still fuels major religious controversies in the United States, as neither side has been able to claim a clear majority. Moreover, this major barrier to older groups coming together also led to a regular set of new groups being formed.

At the time I began mapping the religious landscape, the popular observation was that some 250 denominations existed in America. An initial survey of the scene in the 1960s produced a list of some 750 groups. By the mid 1970s, when we first published, around

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1000 denominations, including a growing number of non-Christian groups, had become visible. In the process, we—and I use the plural because by this time other researchers on the same issues and phenomena had arisen—were able to identify and describe the continuing structures shaping contemporary religious life: *denominations*, or basic religious groupings that focus the week-to-week religious life of people and express their primary religious commitment; and *family groups*, sets of closely related denominations.

While at times it appears that there is simply chaos on the religious scene, such is not the case. There are only so many ways to be religious, and so many religious myths that spiritually animate people. Genuinely new religious myths are exceedingly rare, and almost all newer religious groups develop a variation on one of the fairly small number of old religious myths and adopt one of the even smaller number of ways to organize a religious community. We can see this clearly, for example, in Scientology. Often condemned as a shallow new religion with a science-fiction theology, when we actually analyze the theology, we see that founder L. Ron Hubbard made a forceful restatement of the old Gnostic myth. Understanding that relationship to be one of the oldest and most powerful traditional religious myths helps from a religious perspective to understand why people can find Scientology so appealing as a religious community (though the price is depriving Scientology of at least one of its claims to uniqueness).

However, no sooner had we solved the first problem, than a second rose to the top. It had been posed earlier by a few sociologists like H. Richard Neibuhr, but in the 1970s took on a new level of concern. As originally stated, the problem was something like this: Why are so many young people abandoning the older religious groups for newer ones? At that point, a spectrum of new religions was becoming visible in America. Of course, the new question was a restatement of the older ecumenical problem. The ecumenical imperative pushed us toward unity. The reality of the religious life was disunity, especially at the practical organizational level.

This focus on the “new religions” problem in America had been the result of a legal change. In 1965, the United States revamped its immigration laws. The law favoring immigration from Northern and Western Europe was replaced with one that put Eastern European, Asian and Middle Eastern countries on the same immigration quotas. Those quotas have been filled annually. They brought a new

level of religious pluralism to America. Actually, both ethnic and religious diversity rose sharply through the 1970s and has continued on its upward course in succeeding decades. As a result, America was proving an excellent social laboratory for the study of religion. In America, real freedom, especially concerning religion, was a present reality. This freedom was reinforced by America's high degree of separation between church and state, a condition that prevented government from becoming the arbiter of individual religious choices.

With that background in mind, why were so many leaving the mainline churches (most of which have experienced some thirty years of decline) and so many seemingly joining the newer groups? The traditional answer, of course, was social unrest. Given that this question was asked during the 1960s, it was a logical answer. However, the 1960s were succeeded by the 1970s, the 1980s, and the 1990s, and the number of new religions continued to rise and has yet to slow down.

Furthermore, when we gathered our figures, we saw that the trend had been active for at least 100 years. The steady growth toward religious diversity that was so apparent in the 1960s had been an active force in North America at least since the 1880s. It had persisted decade by decade indifferently through times of relative social unrest or relative calm, through times of peace and times of war, through times of economic prosperity and depression. And it shows no signs of slowing down, much less stopping.

Today, over half of all the 2000-plus primary religious groups operating in the United States were formed after 1960. And lest we think of this as a problem at the fringe, we note that of the six largest religious bodies in the United States, three of them were formed in that time period.

As we observed this rather fluid situation, someone suggested that we had the problem wrong, and after all, stating the problem correctly is halfway to solving it. We were asking establishment questions: Why are so many people deserting us? Why is there dissent? Why are leaders arising who oppose our leadership? That realization again sent us back to the drawing board and to a second look at the problem of religious culture.

II. CULTURAL CHANGES

The continual analysis of culture had shifted—from an understanding of culture as the static possession of a people to a view of culture as a process in which people are continually participating. Culture was, is, and is to be. Change is the norm of life. Living things either change or die. Culture is not static—it changes. That is why, for example, we can speak of the “history” of Western culture. Generation by generation we can document how our culture has changed. Our artistic styles have shifted, new economic structures have arisen, technology has improved, political revolutions have occurred. Our culture continually interacted with neighboring cultures. Cultures may move at a relatively slow pace, or they may move very quickly as they have in this century, but they always move.

So why is there a tendency to see religion as somehow exempt from these moves—as traditional, as conserving the past, as static, as unchanging? A large part of that view derives from the frequent equation of a religion with the identity of a particular people (the Romanian Orthodox Church with Romania) and a particular culture (Christianity with Western culture). We forget the way that present religious majorities displaced older majorities, or the way that a new secular religious-like perspective—Marxism, in its various denominational forms—worked to supplant (and in places succeeded in replacing) the traditional religious identities of many of the world’s peoples.

We tend to forget that some of the very religious groups that today are so protective of their role as the essential religious identity of a people—German Lutherans, for example—were, over the last two centuries, through their well-funded missionary programs, also a significant force in attempting to alter the religious identity of peoples around the world. Religion, like the rest of culture, and like the rest of social life, is constantly changing. It changes or it dies. Let me illustrate.

First, in the case of majority religions, accepted religions assume the task of facilitating the growth of faith and religious sensibilities among the public in the next generation. In so doing, they nurture small group life and individual pieties. In the best case, the new generation recreates the previous one, but always does so with individual flair. It introduces small changes into the tradition that in turn will be passed on to yet another new generation.

As Christianity, for example, made its bid to replace the pre-

Christian Pagan religious cultures, it changed as it adapted to local conditions in various countries and communities. New liturgies appeared in new languages and new theologies followed the new liturgical and linguistic patterns, based on unique religious sensitivities in each area of the world. As it became a world-class religion, the periodic attempts to bring the whole church together to debate the emerging issues in theology and culture ceased. There was no organizational force that could hold such a large far-flung body together.

The Christian church wedded itself to the state. In the East it was somewhat dominated by the government (except in places where it was overwhelmed and pushed entirely into a minority status by the rise of Islam). In the West, Christianity rose to new heights of power as it filled the vacuum left by the fall of the Roman Empire. In the process, it developed a theology of divinely ordained orders (social structures serving vital functions). It also argued for its own hegemony by continuing the idea that the state needed religious uniformity as an essential element in its own stability. In order to ensure public order, the state had the right, even the duty, to enforce religious uniformity, to impose taxes to support the church, to demand citizen support, and to transform religious functionaries into employees of the state.

Even when Western society most closely embodied this idea, change could not be stopped. This is the era in which the crusaders brought Arab thinking from the Middle East and Thomas Aquinas used the writings of Arab Muslims to create a new theology that would soon replace all that went before it. It was also a period in which governments continually suppressed dissidents. Religious dissent appeared wherever space opened for it. Pre-Christian religions survived and were revived. New revelations appeared. New theologies attempted to shore up the inadequacies of older theologies. States vacillated between rulers who cared about religion and those who did not.

Everything began to unravel in the sixteenth century. Europe disintegrated religiously. The at-least-superficial uniformity of religion disappeared as Lutherans—Reformed and Anglican—vied for local control. Numerous minority religions appeared. Interestingly enough, the Reformation and resulting Counter-Reformation occurred just as the New World was discovered. And when we looked at the New World from the perspective of European religious leadership, we got a new perspective on the function it played. It became a

giant trash can, the place to throw away religious garbage. Off to the colonies with all the religious losers—Pilgrims, Congregationalists, Dutch Mennonites, Portuguese Jews, German Rosicrucians, Baptists, Swiss Brethren, Quakers, and Methodists. Not just dissenting groups came, but troubled individuals: the dominant European churches sent to America all their problem personnel—the eccentrics, the criminals, those of questionable theology, those who had trouble with their bishop, and the incompetents.

To some extent, this trend has continued to the present. We cannot, for example, understand the rise of American Buddhism without taking into account—along with the political losers from the Dalai Lama on down—the number of problem priests and theological dissidents who chose to come to America.

Coincidental with America's founding—actually contributing to it—was the rise of secularism. Many of America's founders had imbibed deeply of French secularism. This secularism was not just irreligion, but an active philosophical option that suggested that religious worldviews were wrong and that worship was a time-wasting activity. Secularism offered to replace both with an equally pervasive cosmology and ethical system.

Such irreligion gave rise to two very different understandings of the separation of church and state. One is the dominant notion that the functions of religion and government should be parted. It is the idea that government should not meddle in the religious lives of people (as long as they are otherwise law-abiding) and religious institutions should refrain from partisan politics. In this understanding, religion is seen as assisting the state indirectly by providing moral training for citizens and increasing the level of virtue in the society as a whole. The state maintains a secular order that allows religion to flourish on its own terms. It is assumed that most citizens will be religious, but that they will keep their religious squabbles out of the public sphere as much as possible.

In the second understanding, one that is aligned to many atheist perspectives, the separation is seen as much more radical. The state and religion actually form two mutually exclusive spheres. To participate in one is to refrain from participating in the other, especially at a leadership level. The state is actually hostile to religion and sees religions as offering nothing to the general welfare. Religion is at best entertainment for the mystically inclined. It is tolerated as long as it does not affect anything important. Such a view dominates in

present-day China and has asserted itself powerfully in present-day France. This second understanding is actually a way of instituting a form of secularism as the “religious” perspective of the nation. It usually does not work in a free society, and must be imposed by the coercive power of the state like any other form of “religious” uniformity. For those of us who argue for separation of the first kind, it is important that we distinguish it from that of the second kind.

III. PRESENT CHANGE FACTORS

The existence of the New World was an important factor (to name just one) that contributed to a dramatic alteration of post-sixteenth century Anglo religious culture. The rise of secularism has altered it since the eighteenth century. Today, new forces have been added that appear to be motivating the same kind of pervasive change. Of these, one force stands out—one so massive that, while we can alter its course, it appears that we could do little to stop it even if we wanted to. The latest name we have given that force is *globalization*. This economic term originally described the pervasive effects of the internationalization of trade and technologies and the way that economic factors were making national political boundaries less important in defining economic units. However, we have come to see the concept in cultural and historical terms as well.

Let us play with this idea for a moment, along with one of the other great facts of modern life—the speed of change. The culture is moving so fast that those who try to live in the past will be swept aside. In the midst of this fast-paced global situation, certain new ideas have come to the fore. For example, we now assume that religious liberty is a virtue. One sign of this consensus is that some acknowledgement of religious liberty has been written into almost all the constitutions of the world. At the same time, we have also come to assume the dignity and worth of the individual. While too often found in the breach rather than the observance, the idea of the dignity and worth of the individual has informed all of our international deliberations since World War II. It provides the foundation for our belief in different freedoms. In coming together to create documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Helsinki Accords, powerful ideas have been unleashed upon the world, ideas from which it would now be very difficult to retreat.

Of equal importance, not only have we freed these new ideas upon the world, but we have raised them up and ascribed to them a

global imperative above and beyond the beliefs of local cultures. A recent example of our presenting such an imperative occurred in 1993. At a gathering of religious leaders in Chicago—Roman Catholic cardinals, the Dalai Lama, some Neo-Pagan priests, Zen Buddhist monks, Protestant Christian pastors, and Hindu swamis—the group promulgated what they audaciously called a “global” ethic, an ethical statement that they felt summarized a moral consensus that existed in spite of their very different theological perspectives and national allegiances of those who signed it.

The fact that we can launch ideas upon the whole world simultaneously indicates something of the new situation we face. We now live in an international neighborhood. This means that governments, even as they lift up national identities, will find it increasingly difficult to hide behind arguments of non-interference in internal matters while operating in ways deemed immoral by the international community. Just as the United States has the world looking at it when government agents storm a small religious community in Waco, Texas, so China can expect the world to look at the arrests and deaths of Falun Gong and Christian leaders that occurred for no other reason than to punish those individuals for following their faith. (If I may digress, this underscores the important role of human rights activists. It is our task to continually remind the world of the standards to which humanity now expects nations to adhere.)

Returning to globalization, one symptom of the globalization process since World War II is the development of a pluralistic worldwide culture that is spreading through the new international transportation and communications networks. While nations have focused upon the establishment of political boundaries, we have allowed economic needs to impose upon the world a spider-like web of technology that pays little more than lip service to such boundaries. This web is defined by airport terminals, Internet servers, television satellites, and telephone lines, among others.

For our purposes, the major effect of the new global technology is to destroy national boundaries as containers of cultures. We can separate church and state as a political act. We cannot separate religion from the other elements of culture. Culture, including religion, now flows back and forth along the spider web-like lines of communication and transportation as freely as rock music albums and blue jeans. And the modern global culture is quite subversive of local tradition.

Take France as an example: France exists as an important European country, but the business world now looks to French-speaking Europe as the market entity, and quickly includes French-speaking Africa. And then there is France-in-diaspora worldwide, from Martinique to French Polynesia. In turn, France must now deal with the influx of France-in-diaspora into Europe. Between 800 and 1000 different religious groups operate in the once-Catholic land.

In this emerging global community the key issue is the status of minority religions. *I suggest that the fate of minority religions in a country is as good an indicator as we have of the general state of civil liberties in the country as a whole.* In the manner in which a government treats adherents to minority faiths, one can find a close measure of how it treats individuals and how it respects their choices.

The focus on minority faiths is also important, because as freedoms in general expand, religious pluralism will grow. It is irrational to believe that people who are making a variety of free choices in their secular life will not also make a variety of free choices in their religious life. The processes of religious differentiation that are already present in any given country are now being accelerated in every country by the spread of all religions globally. The process of change in any given location will be accelerated by the influx of material through the global network. Such material can include the diffusion of believers to new settings, the impact of television images, and the arrival of Internet communication.

IV. THE TASK BEFORE US

This analysis presents those of us who are part of the ruling elite (official and unofficial) with both problems and prospects. First, we will be presented with some false problems. For example, some will confuse the continued change within the culture with cultural disintegration. All of us carry romantic images of “the way things used to be,” and all of us are attached to cultural elements that lose their hold on the public and fade from center stage. We are also upset with the fads and fallacies of youth culture. In times of rapid change, it is often easy to confuse the continued development of a culture (including the many false experiments) with its disintegration.

With regard to religion, our missing the process of cultural development has led into a variety of misperceptions. For example, one idea popular a generation ago—and now discarded—was the prophecy that the adoption of a minority religion by a segment of young

people would lead them to abandon the culture of their land as adults, to become unproductive citizens, and to shirk their responsibilities. Having now observed several generations of new religious phenomena, we have seen that members of minority religions readily integrate quite smoothly into the culture if allowed to do so and that followers of those minority religions, as a whole, participate fully in the society.

Laying aside such false problems, there are some very real problems with the emerging pluralism, not the least of which being the level of violence that has continued. Such violence has come as older religious communities expand out of traditional boundaries that once held them, and as new religious impulses arise in a formerly stable religious setting. This turmoil has varied from the open warfare in Sri Lanka between Buddhists and Hindus to the harsh suppression of religious minorities in the Sudan. It can be seen in the attempts of one religious group to impose its belief on others in Nigeria, in the murder of innocent people on a subway in Tokyo by the AUM Shrinrikyo, or in the suicide of members of the Solar Temple in Switzerland and Canada.

In the past, we have generally tried to prevent the violence that occasionally accompanies the rise of new religious communities by forcing a return to an old consensus. In the West, that is the history of the Inquisition, of Luther's attempt to suppress the peasants, and of the British laws imposing uniformity on a hopelessly divided populace. That approach no longer seems a viable option. We have found the attempt to keep down religious innovation as causing more pain and suffering than allowing religion to grow and flourish in its many ways. We also live in a day in which human society is being forced to change, not only because of new discoveries in science and technology, but because of the demands of women, of labor, and of minorities (ethnic, racial, linguistic, tribal, etc.) who will no longer live as second-class citizens. Just as our societies have adjusted to the changes wrought by the entrance of formerly disenfranchised segments of the populations in our several countries—though not without some pain—so we will be able to accommodate the differing religious perspectives of those same people. Through time, old structures crumble, but the culture adjusts. What was new yesterday is commonplace today.

Nevertheless, as the battles rage over new options—some of which will be adopted and continued, others which will be discarded

and forgotten—it is imperative that we find a way to assist people in living with the clash of opinions. It is even more important that we find a way to assist people to live civilly with neighbors who choose a different set of options. Here we have much to learn from some very diverse cultures, such as Hong Kong and Singapore, which have made real progress in these matters.

While the coming of religious pluralism has its problems, it also has its prospects—far beyond its obvious value in offering people the opportunity to choose freely the way they exercise their spirituality and with whom they associate in religious community. First, religious pluralism appears to greatly increase total religious participation. Such increased participation should yield a heightened level of morality in society. If the effort to produce a “Global Ethic” document demonstrates nothing else, it manifests the moral consensus that flows through the majority of the religious communities both great and small, new and old. That consensus is desperately needed by our world. While there are important differences on a few questions at any given moment, religious people have an amazing agreement on the basics of moral existence. Religious diversity—rather than leading to moral chaos—should give new underpinnings for ethical structures. I would also suggest that a heightened level of morality will lead to a greater public support for righteous government as well as higher public participation in that government.

For the world as a whole, religion is still our best source for curbing the evils of the fast-paced culture in which we now live. It is the best tool we have for assisting people to cope with the human condition, and for motivating people to support efforts to build a better world globally. Religion now comes in many shades and colors. We should seize the opportunities that the new religious situation affords and make them work for the good of all in the next generation.

