

Appendix 2:

Mohammed for President?: Pluralism and Uniqueness

A disastrous by-product of the US led wars since 9/11 has been the increasing fear, antagonism, and violence between Christians and Muslims. A cartoon in some small European newspaper caused riots and killing all over the world. A comment by the Pope incited mass protest and anger from Muslims around the world. An Israeli bomb dropped in Lebanon has “Made in the USA” stamped on its shrapnel, connecting in their minds the bomb back to a “Christian nation.” The “war on terror,” now dubbed “the long war” to prepare you for its longevity¹, led largely by Christians, has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians.

The Muslim world, in feeling this rising tension, may conclude what many Christians think of Muslim terrorists: “those religious fanatics think that violence will solve their problems.” Some people in Iraq refer to many in the U.S. as “Christian extremists.” The relationship between Christians and Muslims is at a pinnacle of fragility, as volatile as a powder keg in a room of flying sparks. One must wonder if, at a time like this, anybody should be writing a book with such a totalizing and *unpluralistic* title as “Jesus for President.” Doesn’t this worsen the harsh and violent outcomes of mixing faith and politics? How would we feel about a book titled “Muhammad for Prime Minister”?

Peacemaking between Christians and Muslims will not happen through either party denying the political and public expressions of their faith (nor would that likely happen), but through continually seeking the true depths, meaning, and practice of their own faith. It is easy to forget where most problems stem from in religious conflict: it is not when each side too greatly believes their faith, but it is when people forget and confuse their faith, zealously combining it with another faith (patriotism, nationalism, global-capitalism) and violence. The befuddling mystery of our day is not the presence of sincere Muslims but violent Christians.

Conflict arises between faiths when people think their faith is not faith, but a weapon, knowledge of scientific certitude. Faith is hoping and living for what you cannot see and know for sure. In faith we *confess* the truth; we don’t *have* the truth. Philosophically we might call that an epistemological gap; the Bible simply calls it “seeing through a glass dimly.” Faith is truly faith when you *live* that unlikely hope now. If you don’t *live* faith, it is demoted to the status of a dream. But when you think you have your faith set in stone as a fact, it is mutated to the status of a crusade or a jihad.

Certainly the scriptures speak of living your faith with steadfast assurance, but those exhortations are so that people *live* in a certain way. And yet, ever since the “scientific revolution” it seems that the church has become afraid of the supposed claims of science, thinking that science provides unquestionable facts for knowledge. In response the Church has attempted to counter “science” with its own “assurance of salvation.” This is a misunderstanding of scientific knowledge. Any 6th grade science class will teach you that science never assuredly arrives at “facts”; the best information science provides is a *theory*, supported by some experiments, as yet to be disproved.

¹ See Washington Post, Feb. 3, 2006. “Rumsfeld Offers Strategies for Current War.”

Science should not be feared, but understood as a method for understanding how reality and matter work. Faith, on the other hand, serves to see through and beyond matter, to see into the heart of things, to offer a vision for life and meaning.

The Church need not transform faith into stone-cold facts. The glass we dimly see through will not be shattered so we can see clearly. What the Church is supposed to do with Jesus is not to convince everybody that he is an irrefutable fact (lest they burn!), but to act like him. This is also to say that a Christian's goal is to believe in the way of the cross and resurrection enough to actually follow suit. This is largely more difficult (and rewarding) than convincing one's self or others to abstractly "believe" in it. Belief begins when you take the steps of *obedience*.

In reaction to the vigorous awkwardness of fundamentalists, some may want to avoid identification with a set of beliefs by formulating the fashionable dichotomies:

"I'm not religious, I'm spiritual."

"I'm not a Christian, I'm a follower of Jesus."

"I like Jesus, but not the Church."

There seems to be little hope in the project of Christians to pretend to have a different name than they have had since the Church's inception. It is worth noting that "Christian" was a derogatory name given *to* Christians because they acted like Jesus the Christ. If anything, this should remind us that we would do better to have *others* define for us whether we are faithful Christians (likely with their verbal abuse, not praise).² It is also worth reframing our imaginations to think of ourselves as a part of the *Body* of Christ—a more communal, less individualistic identity than "Christian." Or perhaps we should see "Christian" as a title for which we are aspiring, not that we have attained. But none of these seem like good enough reasons to assume we are doing Jesus a favor by losing the common name and calling ourselves "followers of Jesus."

Or one might want to go further and opt out of the entire drama, saying, "religion is too controversial. I don't want to believe anything." But, the idea of a reverting to a neutral culture is an illusion from pluralism. Even if someone has "no religion" she still chooses to order her life in particular ways, eat in certain ways with certain types or numbers of people, keep to certain rhythms of life, obtain life-supplies from the earth in a certain way (tan a hide or go to Wal-Mart), attend meaningful ceremonies (be it the pub's conversation or a football game's pomp), etc. These are all elements that comprise one's "religion" and "culture" (notice how *cult*, group worship, is at the root of *culture*). It is not as if we are born into a default, flat setting, and then we may or may not choose to add some accessories (some religious actions here, some cultural motifs there). If we do not recognize and choose to cultivate our religion, the most powerful nearby religion will do it for us: the powers, the state, the culture at large, or those who make money by drawing us into their fabricated TV culture. The State has (or is) faith system of its own³,

² Gandhi's response to the question, "Are you a Christian," came the response, "ask the poor."

³ William Cavanaugh, in *Torture and Eucharist* (Blackwell Publishing, 1998, p.136), cites the following, "The modern State aspires to be *Weltanschauung*, a conception of the world and of life, in substance, a religion. Christianity too is a *Weltanschauung*, besides being a supernatural religion. Between Christianity and the modern State conceived as a *Weltanschauung* conflict is inherent and inevitable" (Luigi Sturzo, *Church and State*,

a way to view and act in the world. The Church must not hand its politics over to the State while keeping its “spiritual” convictions to oneself—as if true spiritual convictions have no real world implications. The question is not if you are religious or not, political or not. We all undoubtedly embody *some kind* of religion and politics—it’s *how* that matters.

It is in *living* one’s faith, instead of attempting to convince or kill others to believe it, where different faiths might have legitimate interchange. Scholars and theologians of differing faiths will have deeply meaningful discussion to the extent that they are also *practitioners*, not just indifferent knowledge-brokers. For example, we have been impressed to remember that many Muslims and Jews do not charge financial interest because of their faith. They do this because, stemming from the tradition of the Torah, it takes advantage of their neighbor. It is an act of healing the world, though it undoubtedly requires a sacrifice from them. Wouldn’t Christians do well, instead of aggressively partaking in market capitalism, if they did *something* (every day, systematically, economically) for the sake of others because of their faith? With practical examples, we learn greatly from other faiths (even though this practice comes from the same Bible).

Some might consider our call to seek out and live the radical depths of faith as insulting the debonair demands of pluralism, as a retreat into tribal barbarism. Duke Professor Hauerwas and Willimon offer a counter point:

We reject the charge of tribalism, particularly from those whose theologies serve to buttress the most nefarious brand of tribalism of all—the omnipotent state. The church is the one political entity in our culture that is global, transnational, transcultural. Tribalism is not the church determined to serve God rather than Caesar. Tribalism is the United States of America, which sets up artificial boundaries and defends them with murderous intensity. And the tribalism of nations occurs most viciously in the absence of a church able to say and to show, in its life together, that God, not nations, rules the world.⁴

Lastly, Christians would do well to sympathetically learn about other faiths—for a deeper reason than learning how to convert them. How can a Christian, who so fervently believes that they have chosen “the best religion,” also know nothing about what a Taoist means when they refer to “the Tao” or the “Four Greatnesses”? Or how could one genuinely say, “I don’t believe in Islam” when he or she has never spent time studying the Koran? You cannot reject something you do not understand.

Certainly pluralism has thrown Christians into a frenzy of confusion, resulting often in either aggressive fundamentalism (an epistemology of dogmatic “knowledge” over faith) or in giving up on faith. But Christianity has a way to interact with other religions. But is neither condescension nor compromise for the least common denominator. It is an acknowledgement that our main task is to live our own faith with integrity while exuding a deep respect for other faiths when they live theirs well—or even better than we do, as Gandhi should make Christians blush.

trans. Barbara Barclay Carter (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1962 [1939]), 535).

⁴ *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 42