

The Inadequacy of Pluralism

Pluralism is the strategy by which a variety of religions is allowed to co-exist in the same society and world, some of them believing and preaching mutually-exclusive messages, without being subject to discrimination or penalty.

On the basis of pluralism, which is the current religious regime in the UK, Christianity and Islam, for example, both have the right to declare, with equal freedom and toleration, that theirs is the only way of salvation for everyone in the world in all generations, and that all religions other than their own are false. Self-evidently, they cannot both be right, and at least one must be a delusion, but this is no problem to pluralism, which has no reason to let truth get in the way of a useful social convention.

In recent years, evangelicals have tended to support the concept of pluralism, seeing it as a safe haven in turbulent times. When social attitudes to religion and faith are rapidly changing, with unpredictable results, pluralism, it can be argued, does provide a guarantee that churches can continue in their familiar pattern, with only a relatively modest amount of harassment. Pluralism allows everyone freedom of speech – a rightly-prized entitlement – and therefore enables the gospel to be preached. It permits a church to exercise a wide range of ministries to build its own life. It sanctions the visible presence of a church building within a physical community environment, and tolerates the engagement of that church, through its activities and personal contact, with the people who live in those communities.

Pluralism extends precisely the same rights and privileges to every other religion as well. How much better this is, it is argued, than in many other nations of the world in which one dominant religion holds sway, and the rights of minority faiths are restricted, if they exist at all, and where persecution of various kinds is an everyday occurrence.

Without undervaluing the identifiable benefits of the safety zone which pluralism offers, this article sets out to query whether pluralism is a cause which Christians should seek to espouse, defend and advance in all social and political circumstances. The article first sets out three reasons why pluralism may be deficient, and concludes with a few suggestions in favour of a more triumphalist Christian strategy.

What are the particular deficiencies of pluralism?

The first deficiency of pluralism is that it does not remotely meet a Christian's aspirations.

Let me take you to one of the most delightful scenic views in England. It is the view from the vantage-point, on the border of Leicestershire and Northamptonshire, from which Lord Fairfax spied on the movement of royal troops before the battle of Naseby in 1645. Today the viewer sees a stretch of countryside which is coherent, beautiful, full of interest and unspoiled. The varied greens of the fields, hedges, ridges and undulations form the canvas on which feature the half-hidden houses of Clipston and East Farndon.

It is breathtaking in its beauty, but even more so in its coherence. The scenery screams out that it is part of one society and nation – not merely terrain peopled by a miscellany of unconnected individuals and small groups. Clipston itself is a village from which minor roads shoot out in all directions, along one of which is a 200-year-old chapel building latterly taken over by a more recently-established group of believers.

My aspirations are for the fragrance of Christ emanating from this group of believers to overwhelm the whole population of Clipston, and that this should be the fruit of gospel truth and gospel life in every village, town and city in Great Britain, so that 'the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea' (Habakkuk 2:14). These desires will not be satisfied by the lordship of pluralism.

Secondly, pluralism is inconsistent with the nature of God, and with the pattern of his dealings with men and nations. Pluralism does not square with the jealousy of God, and his insistence that 'I will not give my glory to another, nor my praise to idols' (Isaiah 42:8). If God says that about himself, is it right for us to approve of a public policy in our own nation which regards all religions as equal, and therefore all deities as equal? In pluralism there would be no place for the decree of Darius recorded in Daniel 6:26, since the State could not legitimately intervene to give supremacy to one religion over another.

Thirdly, pluralism is only viable in practice where all religions are minorities, which is effectively the position in 21st century Great Britain. Once any one religion is a majority faith, whichever religion it is, it will inevitably ensure, wittingly or unwittingly, that its own beliefs and values pervade the nation and are reflected in public policy.

We are not only talking about Islam here, in the light of our awareness of the dominance it has in every aspect of politics, society and culture in those countries where it is already the majority religion. We are talking about Christianity as well.

If 90 per cent of the UK population were evangelical Christians, biblical Christianity would become the majority faith and public policy would be based on Bible principles. For the most part this would result, not from government willingness to listen to the voice of the churches, but from the fact that 90% of political party members would also be evangelicals, and manifestos would naturally contain policies which run with the grain of Bible truth and principle, instead of against it. Imagine a world in which 90 per cent of the British Medical Association, 90% of journalists and 90% of schoolteachers are evangelicals. State schools would effectively be faith schools, with the support of the government. The sanctity of life – in the research centres, in the womb and in the care of the elderly – would be secured by ethical medical policies. Dream on, you say. It is a blissful hypothesis, but by the grace of God neither impossible nor unprecedented.

It is not in the above policy spheres that an evangelical majority would face its greatest challenge. The real tension would be over the way in which the majority faith would treat religious minorities. Christianity, and particularly evangelical Christianity, is a profoundly benign religion – much more benign than is sometimes alleged by those who want to be seen to be even-handed in what they say about religions. Even so, this benign Christianity, if in the majority, would struggle to be willing to allow the minority faiths all the rights and privileges they enjoy at present. Of course, without question it would grant them freedom of worship and freedom of speech. But in some of the more public expressions of the presence and the practices of the minority faiths, I expect there would be a tougher regime. Planning permissions and public money would be harder to obtain, the establishment less ready to accommodate diversity, and individual adherents of minority faiths would have more hoops to go through to secure any privileges linked to religious practice.

In a largely evangelical society, the minority religions and their practices are much more likely to be viewed as 'heathen' – as they were in the early years of the modern missionary movement (1792-1850). There would be much more pressure than exists at present to restrict public expression of 'heathen' religious custom and practice.

If this will be the situation if evangelicals became a majority, what should the attitude of evangelicals be under a regime of pluralism?

One option is to have nothing to do with anything except the gospel. This strategy is advanced by some, on the basis that the gospel is our great commission and that to have any other focus could prove to be a damaging distraction.

There is some truth in the underlying fear. When Dr R W Dale (1829-1895) became sole pastor of Carrs Lane Congregational Chapel in Birmingham in 1859, he succeeded John Angell James (1785-1859), an out-and-out evangelical who had helped to establish the Evangelical Alliance in 1848. During his ministry over the next 36 years, Dale became known by a number of epithets, one of which was 'preacher of the civic

gospel'. A contemporary in Birmingham of John Bright (1811-1889), Joseph Chamberlain (1836-1914) and George Cadbury (1839-1922), Dale played a major part in establishing its reputation as 'the best-governed city in the world'. His personal contribution to its health and human well-being was colossal and genuinely reforming. On his watch, the city's education blossomed, life expectancy increased by 15 years through improved housing, and the city gained a 'civic pride' which was widely envied. The fruits of all these benefits were still abundantly evident in the Birmingham of my own childhood in the 1950s. The gains were immense and ought not to be under-stated.

However, the city paid a great price for its social amelioration. With the arrival of Dale, the clear bugle note of the gospel was lost amid the welter of other causes. Not only was it lost in Dale's own church, but in the churches of all the denominations in this teeming city. This set the pattern for more than half a century, so much so that by the 1950s, in the 60-or-so Baptist churches of Greater Birmingham, one would have struggled to find more than two which could have been remotely described as 'evangelical' by today's understanding of the term. Christianity became a religion whose tenets and values inspired a corporate social ethos and agenda, rather than a faith which proclaimed the way of salvation to needy sinners.

Since the danger of downgrade is ever-present, so the argument runs, we should lay aside every other aspiration, and have the gospel solely and centrally as our focus. Those who make this case usually put forward another contention which strongly supports it – that the nation will only change if its people change, and they will only be changed by the work of the gospel. The corollary of this is also true. If people are changed by the gospel in large numbers, the private and public life of the nation will be changed as a natural consequence, without the need to address moral and social issues directly or individually.

The main planks of the above argument are all true, but they are not enough. The earth is the Lord's now, even in deepest spiritual darkness. His lordship must be acknowledged by his people in their entire outlook, conduct and message, all the time. Whatever their circumstances, they cannot believe one thing and preach another. Nor can they proclaim one truth about God from the rooftops, while remaining totally silent about another.

Nor should they take one view when times are hard, and believe or act differently, if we can borrow an expression from the Post-millennialists, should the 'glory days' be ushered in.

The posters outside many churches say: 'We preach Christ crucified.' But we do also preach him 'Lord of all.' Triumphalism is in our generation a word which is only ever used pejoratively, but it is the word which most technically correctly describes the desire to express 'Lord of all' – the supremacy and vindication of Christ in the whole world.

How should we express triumphalism in a pluralist society?

Two triumphalist mind-sets which can be rejected immediately are:

- (a) That Britain is a divinely-favoured nation. There is no biblical nor logical justification for any such idea. God established nationhood as one of his three pre-eminent expressions of community in man's world – the others being the family and the church – but the Israel of the Bible is the only specially-favoured nation.
- (b) That Britain is irrevocably and inevitably a Christian nation and should be regarded and ruled as such, irrespective of its current religious and spiritual state. A nation is what it is now – not what it used to be. It is answerable for what it is now, and any nation which pleases God by the way it conducts itself may be subject to his blessing.

However, three other legitimate and cogent triumphalist arguments can be advanced which will lift evangelical ambitions well beyond the doldrums of pluralism:

- (a) When a country's laws, social assumptions and policies are based on Christian values and biblical principles, this is good for the nation and society.
- (b) The vast majority of Britain's population claims to be 'Christian' whatever it means by that. In the 2001 Census, a question about religious adherence was included for the first time, and 71% professed to be 'Christian.'¹ This is more significant than it may seem, given that the question was entirely voluntary, and Christianity was certainly not the 'default option'. There was a box marked 'None' which fulfilled that role.
- (c) Since 'the earth is the Lord's and everything in it' the people of God have a duty to exercise a prophetic voice. They are the conscience of the nation, reminding rulers that they are appointed by God (Romans 13:1) and accountable to God (Romans 13:4) and have a moral duty to exercise a righteous rule. If the people of God are not fulfilling this prophetic duty, it is certain that no-one else will be.

These triumphalist truths need to be publicly declared to government and institutions, and to all the Christian and non-Christian sections of our population, unhesitatingly and continually, in the wide range of appropriate ways still available to us.

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¹ Since its publication in 2008, in the more recent 2011 Census, the proportion claiming to be Christian had dropped to 59%, but that this is still a significant majority, and the principle still applies. The difference is chiefly explained by the fact that between 2001 and 2011, the proportion claiming to have no religion increased from 15% to 25%. The latter increase is not caused by people abandoning their previous Christian allegiance, but by the fact that far more of the new census respondents (mainly young adults), for whom the 2011 Census was their first, are professing to have no religion than was the case with the elderly generation who died between 2001 and 2011.