

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian
Students

Presented by the
President of

Central Baptist
Theological
Seminary of
Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

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December 30, 2005

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In Jesus' Name?

Trouble seems to be brewing for evangelical (including fundamentalist) chaplains in the United States armed forces. Military chaplains are getting increasing pressure to keep the name of Jesus out of their public prayers. In some instances, praying in Jesus' name has brought reprisals and “counseling,” either from commanding officers or from the chaplain service itself. While these episodes are not yet widespread, they are becoming more common.

According to a recent article in the *Washington Times* (“Military Chaplains Told to Shy from Jesus,” 21 December 2005), Navy chaplain Gordon Klingenschmitt recently began a hunger strike outside the White House in order to raise public awareness of the problem. Klingenschmitt hopes to persuade President Bush to issue an executive order that will permit all chaplains to offer public prayer in accordance with their own faith traditions. The American Center for Law and Justice has gathered 173,000 signatures on a petition supporting such an executive order. Seventy-three members of Congress are among the petitioners.

Such reactions may seem a bit extreme. After all, chaplains are perfectly free to pray in Jesus' name during regular chapel services. The restrictions apply only to prayers offered on special, public occasions, when chaplains are expected to be “sensitive” to the needs of all who are gathered, and to offer prayers that will not offend. If a chaplain cannot offer such a prayer with a clear conscience, he is permitted to decline the invitation to pray. More often than not, even if a chaplain offers a public prayer in Jesus' name, no one is going to complain.

The problem is serious enough, however, that evangelical chaplains are beginning to seek redress. About fifty Christian chaplains have filed two lawsuits against the Navy, arguing that the Navy discriminates against chaplains who are evangelical or Pentecostal. While few chaplains have faced overt reprisals, most evangelical chaplains will privately admit to considerable concern about the direction that tolerance and pluralism have taken in the chaplain service.

Therein lies the real issue. Beneath the friction in the chaplain service lurks a real division over the meaning of pluralism and tolerance. That division reflects a disagreement within American culture at large.

On the one side of the disagreement are those who hold a traditional view of tolerance and pluralism. Traditional pluralism is equivalent to religious freedom. In this vision of pluralism, all persons possess the right to exercise their religious convictions, however wrong those convictions may be. Within the public sphere, no one religion is established, supported, or endorsed by the state and none may be denounced, repressed, or persecuted by the state (except when criminal activity is sheltered under a religious façade). In other words, the state, *as a state*, is not entitled to expressions of religious opinion. Civil authorities, *as civil authorities*, must recognize the equal standing of all religions before the law. All religions enjoy the same right to express themselves, to propagate themselves through persuasion, and to practice whatever they believe God requires of them.

This vision of tolerance and pluralism was introduced into American civilization by Baptists. It was the vision of Roger Williams when he wrote *The Bloudy Tenant* and when he established the Rhode Island colony. It was the vision of Baptists in Virginia when they pressed James Madison to incorporate religious freedom into the Bill of Rights of the Constitution. It was the vision of the Danbury Baptist Association when it wrote to President Thomas Jefferson, in response to which Jefferson formulated the now-famous “wall of separation” doctrine.

On the other side of the disagreement is a newer version of tolerance and pluralism. The advocates of this newer version of tolerance attempt to gain moral points by employing the language of the older version, but they mean something quite different. As we shall see, in the newer version *tolerance* becomes intolerant, and *pluralism* becomes depressingly uniform.

The characteristic of the New Pluralism is that it transfers to individual persons and religions the strictures that used to apply only to the state. Under the New Pluralism, no individual is allowed to assert, to imply, or even to act as if one religion is true to the exclusion of others. To behave as if one’s own religion is better than another is not simply poor form; it is a violation of the New Pluralist ethic. To articulate the particularities of one’s own religion in the public square is worse than rude: it is wrong.

This demand for public uniformity is based upon the unspoken assumption that all religions share a common core and that they are all similar in their essence. The differences are thought to be minor, sufficiently unimportant that they should be suppressed in public. Rather, the focus of public religious statements should be upon the core that all religions hold in common. Therefore, the adherents of each creed are expected to avoid any mention of the distinctive elements of their faith.

The current sentiment is that people have a right not to be confronted with the claims of other peoples' religions, especially when those claims are expressed in absolute terms. Expressions of religion must be made so generic that no one is discomfited. Prayers in particular are now regarded as expressions of the general religious sensibility, and must be made nonsectarian when offered in public. Of course, prayer in Jesus' name underlines the distinctive Christocentrism of Christian faith and implies that prayers not offered in Jesus' name are not heard by God. For this reason, the New Pluralists are committed to expunging prayer in Jesus' name from the public square.

The irony is that the New Pluralism cannot apply its own rules to itself, for the New Pluralism is also a religion. The notion of a generic religion is itself a debatable theological option, one among many. By asserting it in the public square, the New Pluralists violate their own prohibitions. They end up advancing their own religious distinctives, demonstrating that they cannot live with the consequences of their own view.

If the New Pluralists just wanted to present their point of view, they would be harmlessly silly. As the tension over prayer within the chaplaincy illustrates, however, they wish to do much more. They want to enlist the vehicles of power to enforce their own new ethic. They not only assert the superiority of their particular theology, but also seek hegemony for their religion by suppressing other religions through official enforcement.

The New Pluralism is the deadly enemy of religious toleration and freedom. The New Pluralism not only contradicts itself, but actually opposes the older pluralism that valued genuine tolerance. The fact that New Pluralists talk about tolerance should deceive no one. The only tolerance that they want is for themselves and their friends.

How does genuine pluralism work in public prayers, particularly in the military setting? First, prayer should be recognized as an intrinsically religious exercise. The purpose of prayer is to invoke a deity, not to provide an ornament for a ceremony. If we do not wish a deity to be invoked, then we should not ask anyone to pray.

Second, we must recognize that evangelicals or other Christians do not have a corner on the offering of public prayers. While evangelical chaplains may be asked to pray, so may chaplains of other faiths: Roman Catholic, Jewish, or Muslim, to name the main parties. In fact, if we believe in religious freedom, we shall even invite the occasional New Pluralist to offer prayer.

Third, we should assume that whoever is asked to pray will pray according to the dictates of his or her (the chaplain service does include women) faith. Muslims will pray to Allah. Catholics will mention the Blessed Virgin. Evangelicals will pray in Jesus' name. New Pluralists will offer generic prayers to their nondescript deity. When all of this happens, no one has grounds to be offended.

Fourth, civility dictates that all of us maintain a polite silence while the prayer is offered. If the prayer invokes a deity whom we do not recognize, then we need not enter into the prayer. Since we live in a civilization that has established genuine religious freedom, however, we have no reason to become offended when someone offers a prayer to a deity whom we believe to be false.

For myself, I am willing to pray at public events if I am asked. Before accepting, however, I always make it clear that I am a Christian. I point out that, as a Christian, the only prayers I have authority to offer are in Jesus' name. I explain that I will not be offended if people don't want me to pray, but they must not be offended when I pray in Jesus' name. Nor will I be offended when someone else prays a different prayer.✘

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

HYMN

Joseph Addison (1672-1719)

THE spacious firmament on high,
With all the blue ethereal sky,
And spangled heavens, a shining frame,
Their great Original proclaim.
Th' unwearied Sun from day to day
Does his Creator's power display;
And publishes to every land
The work of an Almighty hand.

Soon as the evening shades prevail,
The Moon takes up the wondrous tale;
And nightly to the listening Earth
Repeats the story of her birth:
Whilst all the stars that round her burn,
And all the planets in their turn,
Confirm the tidings as they roll,
And spread the truth from pole to pole.

What though in solemn silence all
Move round the dark terrestrial ball;
What though nor real voice nor sound
Amidst their radiant orbs be found?
In Reason's ear they all rejoice,
And utter forth a glorious voice;
For ever singing as they shine,
'The Hand that made us is divine.' ✘

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