



PLURALISM IN PERIL: CHALLENGES TO AN AMERICAN IDEAL

Report of the Inclusive America Project

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INCLUSIVE AMERICA PROJECT

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Christian Commitment to Pluralism Should Not Waiver

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Prior to the November 2016 election, I had the unique task of having to write my regular column on politics knowing that our readers—professors and administrators who work on Christian college campuses—would receive it shortly after the election. Given the uncertain outcome of the race, the task seemed tricky. Which issues should I inform them about? Would student aid likely be cut, or would higher education regulations likely become more onerous? Would the poor be more protected or made more vulnerable? Would protecting religious freedoms be an Administration priority, or would the Administration adopt a posture of protecting the American citizenry *from* religion? In addition, our association's membership spans 35 different Christian denominations, and studies show that we—the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities—have among the highest amount of political diversity in our faculty, staff, and students in our institutions. So I knew that either way, some readers would be excited, some would be angry, and others ambivalent about the outcome.

However, since both candidates supported things that were consistent with Christian values and beliefs as well as other things antithetical to those values, the content of my column did not depend on who won. As a Christian organization that represents almost 200 Christian colleges and universities in 20 countries around the world, our call would remain the same regardless of the election's outcome: to speak prophet-

ically (or, to use a familiar idiom, to “speak truth to power”) and to live counter-culturally.

For Christians, the foundation for this idea comes from none other than Jesus himself. When asked whether Jews should pay taxes to the Roman government that was ruling over them, Jesus’ deft response to “give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” not only evaded the political snare that had been set for him, but it also clearly demarcated to Christians that while they were to respect earthly political systems, by no means should those systems capture their chief loyalty.¹ Through this teaching, Jesus demonstrated that believers could be involved in both spheres but that there were boundaries around these domains.

These boundaries are the heart of a pluralistic approach to matters of state that Christians should readily embrace. Principled pluralism creates space in society for persons and institutions of diverse belief systems, or none at all, to participate fully in the public square without penalty.

Principled pluralism requires five elements:

1. Societal participants must know what they believe.
2. Societal participants must view those with whom they disagree as people to be convinced instead of conquered.
3. Societal participants must seek first to persuade through the marketplace of ideas, not through law.
4. Societal participants should seek to protect others’ entry into the marketplace of ideas.
5. Societal participants must be willing to champion laws that protect those with whom they disagree.

Principled pluralism must be a foundational element of a society with no religious or ideological test. Without a legal or social structure requiring conformity of thought around these matters, there will be those in agreement and those who dissent. History teaches that, where there is dissent, there is conflict. Conflict is ended when one position “wins” over the other, enforcing a purported unanimity of thought, through law or force,

¹ Matt. 22:21 (NIV).

unless the society itself is positioned to respect and even protect diversity of thought about matters of conscience and conviction that are essential to human existence.

What most undermines a pluralistic society is ignorance—both an ignorance of civic knowledge and an ignorance of religious knowledge. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson’s writings affirm the principle that an educated citizenry is necessary to preserve a democratic government free of tyranny.² Principled pluralism is challenged by those whose own beliefs are unsettled or unmoored and who therefore view those who challenge them as threats. The conflict that exists in a pluralistic society occurs through the written and spoken word, not through physical feat or battle. The conflict of ideas allows people to make their case about why their political ideology or religion is superior without fear of reprisal. Knowledge is an essential element because it creates a foundation from which a person can express and defend her ideas and beliefs without fear.

Ignorance is indeed a great threat in the United States. A 2015 research survey from the Newseum Institute revealed that 33 percent of Americans cannot name a single right guaranteed by the First Amendment, and only 2 percent of those who could name some of the rights remembered the right to petition.³ (Fifty-seven percent named the freedom of speech, 19 percent named the freedom of religion, 10 percent mentioned the freedom of the press, and 10 percent named the right to assemble.)

Another growing and troubling trend among Christians is a lack of biblical and theological knowledge. In 2016, the Barna Group released a report highlighting a sharp decline in Bible reading among Americans—while 46 percent reported reading the Bible at least once a week in 2009, that number had dropped to about a third of Americans, with the gaps even more noticeable among age groups (only 24 percent of Millennials,

2 George Washington, “First Annual Address to Congress in 1790,” presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29431; Thomas Jefferson, “Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge” (1778), tjrs.monticello.org/letter/58.

3 Newseum Institute, “The 2015 State of the First Amendment,” newseuminstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/FAC_SOFA15_report.pdf.

for example, reported reading the Bible weekly).⁴ The decline can be seen in their political views as well. A recent Lifeway poll showed that only one in ten Evangelicals said that their political opinion on immigration had been informed by the Bible.⁵

This lack of civic knowledge and catechesis threatens our pluralistic society, by undermining consensus in the faith-based pluralism of the Founding Fathers. They understood that our American experiment depends in particular on those in the majority to respect and uphold these principles of pluralism. That is why it is especially regrettable when Protestant Christians, who have long been the majority population in the United States, violate those principles essential to a pluralistic society by citing our national values as synonymous with our Christian values or by attempting to use the force of law to get people to adopt Christian practices.

Our faith should inform the individual intersection of Christians with politics and the fulfillment of our civic duties. Christians should confidently embrace those aspects of government that do not cause them to compromise their values, and should criticize those aspects that are contrary to Christian values with equal confidence. Where Christians should be the most enthusiastic is in promoting those aspects of government that allow Christians, and those of other faiths or no faith, to practice freely. But we should not blindly adopt or embrace a government or its leaders, even if they have promised to be supportive of our most important issue(s) or especially if they offer our faith special protection, as we risk paying more in devotion than in tax to Caesar. It must always be clear that as Christians our primary allegiance is not to any person or government of this world.

Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist and author of *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, outlines why people, even those with the same religious convictions, can come to such

4 The Barna Group, "The Bible in America: 6-Year Trends," barna.com/research/the-bible-in-america-6-year-trends/. The Barna Group is a research organization focused on the intersection of faith and culture.

5 Bob Smietana, "Bible Influences Only 1 in 10 Evangelicals on Immigration Reform," *Christianity Today*, March 11, 2015, christianitytoday.com/news/2015/march/bible-influences-only-1-in-10-evangelicals-views-on-immigra.html.



Stephen D. Martin/National Council of Churches

A woman speaks during an interfaith training in Charlottesville, preparing to counter the white nationalist rally.

different political conclusions.⁶ He describes the five moral foundations shared among all humans:

1. Care/harm, which underlines the virtues of kindness, gentleness, and nurturance.
2. Fairness/cheating, which generates ideas of justice, rights, and autonomy.
3. Loyalty/betrayal, which underlines virtues of patriotism and self-sacrifice for the group.
4. Authority/subversion, which underlines virtues of leadership and followership, including deference to legitimate authority and respect for traditions.
5. Sanctity/degradation, which underscores notions of living in an elevated, less carnal and more noble way.

6 Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013).

Haidt concludes that people claim different political affiliations not because some people are more or less moral, but rather because they hold these moral values differently. While liberals and conservatives both place very high values on care and fairness, conservatives also value authority, loyalty, and sanctity equally, whereas political liberals ascribe much lower value to those three categories. What better defense of pluralism than recognizing that such strongly held beliefs can form despite shared values?

Pluralism's great strength is that it does not ask people to weaken their beliefs, political or religious. In fact, it preserves a guaranteed space for them to hold those beliefs strongly—and to live them out in both their public and private lives. Consequently, there should be no greater champions for principled pluralism than Christians.

Without freedom of conscience, freedom to believe, and freedom to live and act on our beliefs, there is no freedom at all. Therefore, whenever we act to defend the freedom of others, ultimately, we are defending our own. So let's duke it out in the marketplace of ideas, over religion, philosophy, and political ideology, but where our laws are concerned, let's work together to ensure that the marketplace of ideas remains open to all.