

Being Christians in a Pluralistic Society

A Discussion Paper on Pluralism in Canada

By The Social Action Commission of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

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Introduction

In a setting as diverse in language, race and religion as Canadian society, Christians are at times uncertain how to witness to the truth of the gospel in public life. When it comes to debates on social issues - from abortion and pornography to changing the social service system or the relationship of Quebec to the rest of Canada - Canadian Christians have often relied on appeals to the historic Christian consensus of past decades, which most Canadians no longer recognize as authoritative.

How to live as Christians in a pluralistic society - this is the major concern the Social Action Commission (SAC) has been addressing since its establishment by the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada in 1964. In dealing with issues involving abortion, pornography, sexual orientation, education, freedom of speech and religion in broadcasting, and changes to Canada's Constitution, the SAC has been developing a specifically Christian response to pluralism.

A. Definitions

In our current situation, neither pluralism nor secularism may be properly understood without reference to liberalism. The relation between liberalism and pluralism lies close to the heart of many of the problems with contemporary understandings of pluralism.

1. Pluralism

"Pluralism" has many meanings. First, it refers to the existence together in our society of people of different beliefs, ways of life, cultures, races, religions and ancestries. This type of pluralism has several different dimensions. In their book, *Pluralisms and Horizons*, Richard Mouw and Sander Griffioen distinguish three types. "Associational pluralism" refers to the different types of structures and organizations

within which people live - e.g., families, schools, factories and countries. "Contextual pluralism" refers to the contexts and cultures within which people live - e.g., being Italian or South African, male or female. "Directional pluralism" refers to the various visions of the proper life to which people adhere - e.g., being a Catholic, an atheist or a hedonist. These different types of pluralism affect everyone: we often find ourselves fitting in with different groups of people, depending on what is at issue. In some cases, Italian, Irish and Nigerian Catholics will find they have much in common despite their different cultural backgrounds. In other cases, an Italian Catholic and an Italian atheist may find they have more in common with each other than with anyone else (e.g., supporting a national team in World Cup competition). In this sense, pluralism is simply and undeniably a fact of life and not necessarily an ideological imposition.

Another set of meanings of pluralism refers not to the factual situation of diversity itself, but to how one should respond to it. The real challenge to those who live in a pluralistic society is how to deal with the significant differences that exist. How does one live with neighbours? How do people with different views live together justly? Often the term pluralism is used to describe someone who believes that all differences are good and should be encouraged. Sometimes this view veers over into a type of relativism which holds that *all* differences (including directional differences) should be accepted equally. In this paper, the term pluralism will be used in the first sense, i.e., to refer to the *fact* of differences.

2. Liberalism

"Liberalism," as used here, does not refer to the Liberal party, or liberal theology, or the American sense of liberal, but rather to the view that the highest good for a human being is to be free. Politics, therefore, is about maximizing that freedom by

removing every unnecessary barrier in the way of human choice. This view exists on the right: capitalism is about maximizing choice within the market. It exists also on the left: a strong emphasis on ensuring the capacity to choose. As an ideology, it permeates the entire Canadian political spectrum and all political parties in Canada. Taken together, the various facets of liberalism reveal a variable political attitude that stresses individuality, freedom, autonomy, rights, the separation of religion and politics, reason, tolerance, the non-imposition of belief, and decent progressiveness.

The roots of liberalism can be traced to certain developments in the early modern era, notably: (a) the appearance of independent workers (or families) due to urbanization, the growth of a market economy and industrialization, and the consequent growth of individualism and the theories of autonomy and freedom; (b) the attempt to found the state on a non-religious basis due to the problem of the 16th- and 17th-century religious wars, which has led to an emphasis on separating religion and politics; and (c) the growth of rationalism and Enlightenment philosophies, leading to anti-dogmatism, rationalism, and a belief in human autonomy and progress through reason.

The political creed of liberalism has varied over time. However, one peculiar feature of modern liberalism is the frequent claim that it has no - or is no - creed. During the latter half of the 20th century, in which liberalism became ascendant or dominant, its claim to have "no creed" has come to the fore. The central tenet of liberalism - that the essence of humanity is freedom and the goal of each human being is to shape the world as he or she may want it - has led liberal thinkers to emphasize that they do not wish to impose their way of life on anyone else, but their desire is that all should be free to live out their own ways of life with the least hindrance. Hence, liberalism is claimed to be a *neutral* philosophy.

Liberalism is currently asserted as a form of pluralism. Given the emphasis in liberalism on neutrality and openness, liberals see themselves as exponents of pluralism *par excellence*. Indeed, liberals often assume that *theirs* is the only genuine way of managing directional plurality. They wish to provide the setting in which each individual pursues his or her own freely chosen life, in which each tolerates the other, each view is held in equal respect, no view is imposed upon another, and the state is neutral between all competing particular value claims. Such a view does not lead to an open society but to the imposition of individualism upon all, thereby replacing a plural society with a homogeneous liberal one. Liberalism is *not* an adequate form of pluralism: rather, it is a significant

force in the homogenization of our society.

Many Christians have accepted the assertion of a close association between liberalism and pluralism and therefore have either rejected pluralism because they think they must reject liberalism, or else they have embraced liberalism because they believe they must embrace pluralism. A rejection of liberalism does not need to imply a rejection of pluralism. It demands instead that Christians investigate the possibility of an authentically Christian form of pluralism.

3. Secularism - the liberal response to a religiously pluralistic society

Liberalism requires the least possible amount of interference with individual freedom, and this in turn requires keeping religion confined to private life. This privatization, or marginalization of religion in public life, defines secularism as a particular political response to religious pluralism.

Liberalism adopts a secularist response to the presence of religion in public life because, for liberalism, ignoring religious differences is the only way to live in harmony and to do justice to one another. It advances a view that excludes all religions from having a part in public life and pronounces this a form of respect for religion. In reality, such a response points towards the basic defect of liberalism - namely that it trivializes differences, especially religious differences. Although liberalism holds respect for all religions, in fact it forces the privatization of faiths by removing them from the public realm.

Imagine a situation in which people are trying to agree on what sport, if any, to play. Some people want hockey, some soccer, some basketball; some want to play no sport at all. They have a definite plurality of views about sports: they discuss and suggest various compromises. Finally someone says, "We can't play a sport that pleases everybody; it's sure to be a sport that at least somebody does not want. The only solution that would be fair to all is to play no sport at all." Such persons claim to be fair and impartial, but they fail to see that they are offering their own preference and rejecting everyone else's.

Another problem of liberalism is the claim that it is common to everyone. Even when addressing an audience who are all but standing up and yelling, "No! We disagree with you! You are wrong!" proponents of liberalism nevertheless say, "But we just give the basic common denominator. We have values that are agreeable to all. We have found the means of resolving all your differences - if you put your religion aside." What liberalism has not seen is that it is not a position above the others; it is only a position alongside the others. One can

certainly have dialogue with a secularist or a liberal, but one of the things that is almost impossible to get across in a liberal setting is the point that the liberal or secular option is not the only means of dealing with differences; rather, it is merely one possible option among many for dealing with differences. It has to be brought alongside, not placed above.

It is misleading to suggest that a secular solution, especially a liberal solution, can provide the means for the coexistence of religions. Such an approach takes away the strength, the particularity, and the meaning of each religion. Christians, therefore, must assert that real religious differences should be brought into the public space and openly addressed.

In summary, it is necessary to distinguish carefully among pluralism, liberalism and secularism. Though pluralism is a fact, a pluralistic society does not need to be a secular or liberal society. Pluralism simply means that people with different views need to find a way to live together. One of the major problems in our society is that liberalism often claims and pretends to be the only form of pluralism. In reality it is a form of secularism that does not give much freedom to communal diversity, especially religious diversity. Christians therefore need to develop an approach to pluralism that is more amenable to Christian concerns, that is integrally Christian, and that is fully just to the real differences among religious groups.

B. Possible Christian Responses to Plurality

The possible range of responses towards plurality on the part of Christians generally fits into three categories.

1. Accommodation

Accommodation advances the idea that one should not enter the public realm with a specifically Christian view. The public realm should be reserved only for views agreeable to all and on a basis that can be accepted by all.

This is an impossible position, however, because no common basis is accepted by all. This is what pluralism is all about. For example, the “comparative religions” approach to dealing with the subject of religion in public schools is not neutral; it does not transcend a Muslim, Christian or Jewish view. It is simply one more view about religion, one that holds that the basic way of understanding religion is from a detached perspective, using some form of sociology or anthropology. Although there are worthwhile aspects to such an approach, it is doubtful that it is really possible to understand any religion this way. And it is still only one view alongside the others.

Accommodation, then, requires religious groups to deny their

particularities, and at least tacitly to promote secularism. In taking a supposedly neutral stand on something that is supposedly agreeable to everybody, Christians would in fact be taking somebody else’s - the liberal’s or secularist’s - stand.

Accommodation should not be confused with attempts by Christians to communicate without using explicitly Christian language. When communicating in our society, it is often helpful to use language that resonates with our culture at large and not just with the Christian community. This is especially true in the media and in politics. Although quoting religious texts before government commissions is considered by some as a public declaration of faith, doing so usually results in misunderstanding. Real communication, after all, is not what is said, but what is heard. In communication, the objective is to express the truth we wish to convey in such a way that listeners will hear and understand it. Finding an understandable means of expression, even if it does not use explicitly Christian terminology should not be mistaken as accommodation. Nor should the absence of explicitly Christian language lead one to think that what is being expressed is neutral. Every statement we make as Christians should reveal what we believe is important in the world.

2. The Christendom option

The Christendom option contends that one should use the power of government to impose a Christian way of life upon an entire population. Even though this likely is not even feasible in our society, it should not be tried. It might be desirable for an entire society to adopt a Christian way of life, but the problem with the Christendom view is with the means by which it tries to accomplish such an objective. It confuses the task of the church and the task of the state.

While both the church and the state are God-given institutions with God-given responsibilities, they are called to fulfill different tasks. It is not the task of the state to compel people to believe in God. Renewing the heart of human beings to love God is a task for the preaching of the Bible and the church, and not the state. Sin and crime are not the same things. Although the greatest sin is to break the greatest commandment (“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and your neighbour as yourself”), one cannot enforce such a requirement by making it a legal commandment. One cannot say that those found not loving their God with all their heart, mind and soul and strength will be fined \$50 for the first offence, for example.

3. Christian pluralism

A third response to a pluralistic society is “Christian pluralism” - “pluralism” because it recognizes diversity within society, and “Christian” because our response to society needs to be Christian. There are many different ways of responding to plurality: a pluralist response which seeks to accommodate diversity should not be rejected per se. Rather, one must distinguish among different kinds of pluralism, supporting some and opposing others. Although liberalism is only one response to plurality, at present it does permit a significant degree of diversity and religious freedom in our society.

The various approaches to plurality depend on the nature of the diversity. In some situations, it may be possible for diverse approaches to an issue to be accommodated and so coexistence is appropriate. In other situations allowing a plurality of responses is not possible. In such cases we must advocate a single response. One must constantly be asking, Is this an area where one should try to coexist or is there room for only one response. Each of these strategies could be correct or incorrect, depending on the specific issue. If the question is whether or not there will be a good abortion law, in the end it is a win-lose question. There are many other social solutions that can and should be applied on the matter of abortion, but on the question of a law protecting life, allowing a diversity of responses cannot be condoned. In other areas, such as education or family law, various groups might be permitted to do things in different ways.

C. A Christian Pluralism

Neither accommodation nor the Christendom approach provides an adequate Christian response to pluralism. The remainder of this essay outlines in some detail aspects of a specifically Christian response.

1. Organizational structure

There are at least four patterns of Christian action operating within Canada. Basic to evangelical Protestantism is a model in which individuals in different places in society work to transform society. Many mainline churches have used a model in which the denomination addresses society. The Anabaptist model emphasizes the church as an alternative community, not so much as a congregation, but as a whole way of life. The Reformed model emphasizes the action of Christian organizations.

Each of these strategies of working in the world today is important. If life within the church community does not provide a consistent witness, the credibility of other endeavours will rightly be suspect. Unless there are Christians who are involved in daily interaction with non-Christians, the

church will never understand much of what is happening in the world. Unless preachers within denominations understand the relation of the Bible to the outside world, there will be little direction for the laity of the church. Unless Christians work in an organized fashion through Christian organizations, they will have little impact. None of these dimensions can be dismissed or disregarded: all must be operating in healthy church life, and there must be an effort to make them mutually reinforcing. When lived in obedience, they can all be means of transforming the world.

2. Manner of acting

Apart from an organized pattern of action, there are many things to be done regarding our manner of living in the world. These can be divided into three general categories: persuasion, coexistence and winning.

First, persuasion should characterize our efforts in developing a Christian culture. Christians must resist the temptation to use the state to impose everything. Instead, Christians have to be salt and light within every dimension of society, and by so doing both spread the gospel and win people to Christ as well as make society and the world more humane. Attempts to transform our society in a Christian direction need to be done in a free and open way. Christians have a great deal to offer in helping a pluralistic society achieve at least minimal levels of respect, tolerance, honesty and integrity. Without these it is not possible for a pluralistic society to exist.

Speaking on the legalism and fixation of rights in North America at a commencement ceremony at Harvard in 1978, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said:

...western society has chosen for itself the organization best suited to its purposes, and one I might call legalistic. The limits of human rights and rightness are determined by a system of laws; such limits are very broad. People in the West have acquired considerable skill in using, interpreting, and manipulating law. Every conflict is solved according to the letter of the law, and this is considered to be the ultimate solution. If one is right from a legal point of view, nothing more is required. Nobody may mention that one could still not be entirely right, and urge self-restraint or renunciation of these rights, call for sacrifice and selfless risk: this would simply sound absurd. Voluntary self-restraint is almost unheard of; everybody strives towards further expansion to the extreme limits of the legal frame. I have spent all my life under a communist regime, and I will tell you that a society without any objective legal scale is a terrible one indeed. But a society with no other scale but the legal one is also less than worthy of man.

We need Christian influence to resist and reverse this

commitment to legalism. Our understanding of law and responsibility is also crucial to current questions of Canadian unity and identity. A society that stresses little more than individual rights and freedoms cannot maintain a common and mutually supportive identity.

Three features - weightiness, hearing and openness - must characterize the Christian attempt to influence society. Nietzsche said, "At the end of times everything becomes light; everything becomes weightless." People in our society have a kind of weightlessness, a rootlessness with no sense of where to go. The creation of a universe in which people want absolute freedom to make choices, and which is totally indifferent to the choices that are made, is madness if there is no standard of judgment at all. In this situation it is important to be weighty. This does not mean being solemn, but being solid - that is, to provide a substantial point of reference for decisions.

Christians also need to listen and really hear what others have to say. If Christians do not do so, they cannot expect others to listen to them. More importantly, Christians need to hear others because of what they might learn. For example, the church learned a good lesson from the humanists (who are now frequently castigated by the church) about not oppressing people with whom it disagrees. The church needs to hear what non-Christians (including Muslims, secularists, liberals and others) are saying about society.

The good things that are heard when listening to others need to be affirmed. Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary and author of *Distorted Truth*, complains about the way students in philosophy courses are often told why certain philosophical ideas are wrong. But they are seldom told why people believe these things if they are entirely wrong. For example, if liberalism is so bad, why are people liberals? Are they more wicked than we are? Probably not. Are they more stupid than we are? Certainly not. Why? Because it is something that contains truth.

Liberalism attracts people because of the way it points towards the great truth and crucial importance of human freedom, of living in a way which is not controlled and determined, and people can make their own choices. As we deal with positions and ideas that we criticize and reject, we must always ask, "What is the truth being said here?" and then affirm that truth.

Christians also need to be open to change. Often fearful of change, Christians need to accept with confidence that the world, and history, and change are in God's hands. This requires a certain openness to new possibilities. Often we are

driven more by a desire to avoid sin than to do good. Instead of asking "How can we get through the day without sinning?" it is better to ask how we might best serve God. How do we do what is right? How do we learn? What possibilities will come? This kind of openness prepares us for change.

Compromise is also vitally important for shaping our culture. Compromise needs to be considered carefully because it is both fundamentally dangerous and fundamentally important. Despite categorical denunciations on the part of some, compromise is an inescapable part of the adjustment that is necessary for living together with other human beings. As Christians we cannot compromise on the authority of the Bible or on the fundamentals of the faith. Although one should not compromise on such beliefs, it is helpful to distinguish between principles and laws. Laws are an attempt to articulate as fully as possible a particular principle in a concrete historical circumstance. Many different elements, including pragmatic ones, properly go into the making of laws. Compromise is, therefore, an essential part of lawmaking. In order for Christians to reshape society wisely, it is necessary to learn about wise and foolish compromises.

Second, in addition to persuading others and trying to shape a Christian society, Christians need to coexist with others. For their own integrity, it is vital that Christians not look for advantage just for themselves when they press government for legal changes. It is important to respect that it is the task of the government to govern for everybody. A government is to be just to all citizens within its protection, no matter who they are. It is not forsaking a Christian responsibility when it seeks to protect the interests of someone who is secular or Muslim. Its responsibility is to do justice and to protect each person in society. When Christians go to government concerning matters where it is possible to have coexistence - i.e., where other people do things we don't like and we do things they don't like - it is better to try to establish rules to enable everyone to exist justly alongside one another than it is to seek only that which gives most benefit to Christians.

This is the truth in the Dutch Calvinist idea of "pillarization." For example, if it is not possible to have the coexistence of different views within one school, there need to be types. Instead of trying to control everybody by means of government, it is better to try to exist in communities and organizations alongside one another, and to open up society to coexistence. This is a biblical theme. In the parable of the wheat and the tares, Jesus said, "Let them grow up together." Uprooting them would destroy everything. God sends the rain on the just and on the unjust. God's grace is extended to every

person in the world. The stance taken by Christians towards government must take into account the responsibility of a government, as the political guardian of all, to everybody in its jurisdiction.

The third category of action in society concerns the necessity of trying to win struggles. Neither Christians nor anybody else can coexist in everything. Though it is certainly possible to have a Christian school and a Jewish school and other schools, it is not possible to have a Christian energy policy and a Jewish energy policy and another energy policy all at the same time. The same is true for tax systems, constitutions, international relations and transportation. The process by which policies in these areas are developed should allow for diverse ways of life, but in themselves such policies must display a unity. These are areas where it is not possible to have many different options at the same time. In issues where diversity is not possible, it is our Christian responsibility, politically, to seek to win that which is just for everybody and not only that which is good for us. Winning has integrity only if Christians show an equal level of concern for issues that involve sharing and coexisting, not winning or losing.

3. Characteristics Needed

In addition to providing definitions for the terms pluralism, liberalism and secularism, this paper has described three dimensions of Christian social action: to transform society by seeking to persuade people; to coexist in areas where possible; to seek to win in areas where coexistence is not possible. Success in each of these aspects demands a combined measure of wisdom, knowledge, freedom and joy. It is crucial to be knowledgeable and wise in distinguishing among the various dimensions of action. It is necessary to have integrity in the areas we should transform, forbearance in the areas where we should coexist, courage in the areas we should win, and wisdom to know the difference. Wisdom is not obtained by reading books; it comes from actual life experience. Christian social action always involves elements of godly judgment that are the fruit of patient, divinely molded experience.

An excellent perspective concerning freedom was written by John Calvin, a person with a fearsome reputation and some gentle writings. Calvin asks why people obey God. It ought not to be out of fear or a desire to win approval, but rather out of gratitude. We offer freely to God because God offers freely to us:

See how all our works are under the curse of the law if they are measured by the standard of the law! But how, then, would unhappy souls gird themselves eagerly for a work for which they might expect to receive only a curse? But if, freed from this

severe requirement of the law, or rather from the entire rigour of the law, they hear themselves called with fatherly gentleness by God, they will cheerfully and with great eagerness answer, and follow his leading.

To sum up: Those bound by the yoke of the law are like servants assigned certain tasks for each day by their masters. These servants think they have accomplished nothing, and dare not appear before their masters unless they have fulfilled the exact measure of their tasks. But sons, who are more generously and candidly treated by their father, do not hesitate to offer them incomplete and half-done and even defective works, trusting that their obedience and readiness of mind will be accepted by their fathers, even though they have not quite achieved what their fathers intended. Such children ought we to be, firmly trusting that our services will be approved by our most merciful Father, however small, rude, and imperfect these may be. (*Institutes*, III, xix, 5)

Finally, it is important to remember that the work of Christians needs to be characterized by joyfulness. God calls us to be joyful. This may be difficult when facing the many tragedies experienced in the world each day. But joy can be our response even in this world if it is combined with work that saves people from death.

There are many sources of joy. As Christians, we are members of a community that is worldwide and full of shining witnesses and miraculous transformation. Even now, with events in eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America, the globe is being reshaped by Christian action. But the ultimate source of joy lies in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, who has promised us hope. Jesus says, "Be of good cheer. I have already overcome the world." The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.

D. Conclusion

Living in a society characterized by diverse languages, cultures and religions affords us unique opportunities to live out the gospel of Christ. Not all forms of diversity should be resisted; some are to be celebrated, some accommodated and others must be challenged so that justice and righteousness will prevail. Our duty is to engage our neighbours in dialogue and seek to persuade them of the wisdom and blessing of living a life of faithfulness to God.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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The SAC's position paper on pluralism in Canada derives largely from the work of Dr. Paul Marshall, a political theorist and chairperson of the SAC from 1986 to 1994. See "Being Christians in a Plural Society," presentation made at the SAC-sponsored "Secularization and Pluralism" conference (April 1991); and "Liberalism, Pluralism and Christianity," *Fides et Historia* XXI, No. 3 (October 1989): 4-17.