

American Pluralism and Lunchbox Evangelism

By J. Brent Walker

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(Gal 5:1; I Peter 3:15)

America is an astonishingly diverse country. Our national motto is *E Pluribus Unum*, and, for better or for worse, we are more *pluribus* than *unum*. Our other motto is "In God We Trust." Well, in our nation we have citizens who trust in many gods and some trust in no god at all. With all of the deep splits and disagreements that divide us, particularly over religion, culture and politics, it's important that we try to find common ground or at least figure out a way to live together with our differences without disparaging the other person's rights of citizenship or religious beliefs.

I'm reminded of a Peanuts cartoon in which Sally tells Linus, "I would have made a good evangelist." "Oh, yeah? How come?" "You know that boy who sits behind me in the classroom?" Sally asked. "Yes," responded Linus. "I convinced him that my religion was better than his." "How'd you do that?" Sally answered, "I hit him over the head with my lunchbox."

This is what I'm talking about. We need to avoid hitting each other over the head with our cultural, political and religious lunchboxes or calling judgment down on those who are different. The recent remarks of various evangelical leaders like Franklin Graham and Pat Robertson disparaging Islam is exactly the wrong way to go. Who can forget Jerry Vines at the SBC several years ago calling the prophet Muhammad a "demon-possessed pedophile?" I wonder how he would react if a Muslim were to call Jesus a homeless wine-bibber who hung out with prostitutes and publicans?

The plush pluralism we see today was in the cards from the very beginning, you know. It started at least by the 1630s in Massachusetts Bay Colony when the Massachusetts moral majority declared, "you must believe and behave as we say." The Puritans came to these shores to find religious freedom, but when they got here they turned around and denied it to everybody else. But the voices of people called Baptists could be heard over the shouting saying, "ain't no one on earth gonna tell us what to believe. We answer to God alone on spiritual matters, not to the magistrate."

One who spoke such words was a young Puritan preacher by the name of Roger Williams. Called by some the "apostle of religious liberty," he came to Massachusetts Bay from England preaching and teaching "soul freedom" the notion that faith cannot be dictated by any Civil or ecclesiastical authority, but must be nurtured freely and expressed directly to God without human interference. He spoke out forcefully about voluntary religion and liberty of individual conscience. He was accused of entertaining dangerous opinions such as (1) the Indians should be paid for their land, (2) civil government had no authority over the conscience and souls of human beings, and (3)

churches can flourish quite well without state support. The Puritan theocrats in Massachusetts were not amused with his wild-eyed heresy. When they had heard enough, they booted Roger Williams out of their colony.

He began the long trek south to a new land—slogging on foot through snow and surviving the frigid New England winter only with the help of the Narragansett Indians. Searching for a place where he could be true to his beliefs, where his conscience would remain unmolested by civil authority, Roger Williams and others settled in a place he called "Providence" because he figured that God's providence had led him there. And he gave birth to what would later become the colony of Rhode Island. Its guiding principle, its reason for existence, its claim to fame, was complete and absolute religious liberty. Williams began what he liked to call, "livelie experiment" and in 1638, founded the first Baptist church on North American soil.

As a result, Rhode Island became a safe haven for all sorts of religious outcasts and misfits—people who would not permit the religious establishment to make decisions for them, who would not allow the government to decide spiritual issues or meddle in matters of faith. [Sure, Rhode Island had its blind spots by modern standards. Catholics—though unmolested in their worship—were not allowed to hold public office and Jews were denied full-fledged citizenship. But Rhode Island was light years ahead of its time.]

Rhode Island was a fussy place—a messy place. Rhode Island was a "sectarian free-for-all" for every stripe of theological expression. As historian Ed Gaustad has reminded us, part of the problem of inviting people to a haven for conscience is that, sooner or later, everybody is going to come. And come they did! And the sects and denominations competed mightily for the hearts and souls of the people. Roger Williams himself engaged in heated debates with the Quakers, one-on-one. But the government was not allowed to take sides in those religious disputes. Williams had, in his words, successfully erected "a wall of separation between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world."

Despite the urging of Williams and successive generations of Baptists, complete religious liberty was slow in coming. Centuries of religious intolerance were firmly ingrained, and old habits died hard. All but four states (Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, Delaware and New Jersey) had officially established churches and varying degrees of persecution and intolerance. All but two states (Virginia and Rhode Island) had religious qualifications for public office; five denied basic civil rights to Catholics; and in Vermont, blasphemy was a capital offense.¹

But the wise founders of our Republic had a different vision for the new country—one more in line with the vision of Roger Williams and the Baptists than John Cotton and the Puritans. They took the bold, radical step of separating church and state in civil society. They provided in Article VI of the new Constitution that there would be no religious test for public office. These able architects of the new nation further decided that the federal government would not be permitted to make any law "respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." These initial 16 words of the Bill of

Rights erected "twin pillars" protecting the freedom of religion and upholding the wall of separation between church and state. These two clauses, when taken together, require government to remain neutral toward religion— turning it loose, leaving it to flourish or flounder on its own.

For the first time in human history, a nation denied to itself the right to become involved in religious matters or violate the conscience of its citizens. One's status in the civil community would not depend on a willingness to profess any religious belief.

James Madison, the father of our constitution, was a devout Anglican and studied theology at a Presbyterian college— what would later become Princeton University. He thought diversity was essential to the success of our new form of government. He foresaw political factionalism and, to use his words, a "zeal for different opinions concerning religion." (Fed. #10). He hoped that, as the factions competed for the minds and souls of the people, this pluralism would prevent any one of them from dominating the political and cultural landscape. Madison penned these prophetic words in The Federalist Paper #51:

[S]ociety itself will be broken into so many parts, interests and classes of citizens that the rights of individuals, or of the minority, will be in little danger from interested combinations of the majority. In a free government the security for civil rights must be the same as that for religious rights. It consists in the one case in the multiplicity of interests, and in the other in the multiplicity of sects. [The degree of security in both cases will depend on the number of interests and sects; and this may be presumed to depend on the extent of country and number of people comprehended under the same government. [Emphasis supplied]]

So, it should come to no surprise to any of us more than two centuries later— given the disestablishment of religion, the explicit constitutional protection for religious freedom and the endorsement by Madison of a robust pluralism— that we have developed the dizzying diversity of religion that we have. Ed Gaustad was right. If you say, "y'all come," and claim to protect religious diversity, then that's exactly what's going to happen, and it did.

Whether you like it or not, pluralism abounds today— to an extent that I'm sure even Madison did not fathom. Estimates reveal more than 900 Christian denominations and sects, and 650 non-Christian groups. We have as many Jews as Presbyterians and as many Muslims as Episcopalians. The dominant faith in Hawaii is Buddhism, and in Utah it is Mormonism. And in most towns of any size in America, you can see mosques, temples and synagogues, as well as steepled churches.

I want to join Madison in proclaiming that pluralism is positive. Not only was it expected, not only did we see it coming, but pluralism is positive. I'm not endorsing an "anything goes" moral relativism. One can hold tenaciously to his or her own beliefs while according the other person, seen and unseen, the right to think differently and to come to a different conclusion about his or her spiritual destiny.

Nor does respect for pluralism and religious freedom rule out the right to bear witness and to evangelize the surrounding community. In fact, they encourage and make real evangelism possible!

The incredible freedom we enjoy as Baptists and Americans allows us to share our faith with others at home and abroad. We are all painfully aware of places in the world where speaking the name of Christ to another gets you killed or thrown in jail. Baptists historically have valued missions and evangelism as much as freedom. Respecting the other person's soul freedom does not mean you cannot share your faith with that person; it does mean, however, that you respect and honor his or her right to tell you no.

Moreover, religious freedom and resulting pluralism has in a real sense brought the world to us. No longer do we discharge the Great Commission to take the gospel to "the ends of the earth" only by sending foreign missionaries no, the "world" is now next door, down the street, in the adjoining cubicle, in the classroom. It allows us to get to know and understand other people and religious points of view. Ideally, "with-nessing" should precede "witnessing". It makes our evangelism so much more effective. And, it allows us to learn from the Hindu, the Buddhist, the Jew, and the Jain. As Christians we believe we know the *ultimate* truth in the person of Jesus Christ; but we do not presume to know *all* the truth. We can learn a lot from our brothers and sisters regardless of their religious tradition.

Finally, all of this means that we live with and work with the "other" trying to find common ground where we can and disagree, agreeably, when we must.

A good example of this is the work that we do in the ecumenical context in Washington. We work in a broad coalition of widely diverse religious groups from the far-left to the far right, Jewish and Muslim, evangelical and liberal, and Catholic and Protestant. We are able to do this despite our deep differences over religion and other policy issues. And we do so as we stand on common ground and seek to influence policy goals that will expand religious liberty of all of us.

And this is biblical, too. Paul announced the clarion call of freedom in Christ to the Galatians when he said "for freedom Christ has set us free, do not submit again to the yoke of slavery." But there was no greater evangelist in the early church than the apostle Paul. His embrace of freedom did not detract from, it added to his enthusiasm for sharing the gospel. Then, his counterpart, Peter, tells us in his first letter that we must "always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence."

This is not, I submit, what is happening today. There is nothing gentle and reverent about some of the scathing attacks we hear against other religions, especially Islam.. No, I think that we would do better to follow the advice of Chuck Colson. He said that we will never evangelize the world or win the culture war by "waving placards in the faces of supposed enemies or whacking them with our leather-bound bibles." Instead, Brother Colson tells

us the best thing we can do is "to live as a holy community embodying the love of Christ, demonstrating Christianity's benefits to the culture at large."

Our evangelism must always be done in the context of our pluralism and freedom and be imbued with the grace of God, the love of Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. And with all due respect to Charles Schultz, we should share our lunches with a hungry world, but refrain from wielding our lunchboxes as weapons of hate and intolerance.

¹ Douglas Laycock, "'Nonpreferential Aid' to Religion: A False Claim About Original Intent", *27 Wm. & Mary L Rev.* 875, 916 (1986).