

This is Not a Liberal View: On Faith and Society

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One thing Christianity cannot afford to overlook is the intertwining relationships between religion and society. That is, the need to understand progressions of religious thoughts in light of the evolutions of human societies. Often, important ideas and practices emerge amidst the presence of crisis. Without crisis, faith risks being treated as an add-on. When we see Christianity as a set of stable body of God-given doctrines that people must believe in their heads and believe that departing from them is un-Christian, we depart from the lives and ministry of Jesus.

Jesus lived at a time when Jewish people were under-seized by the Roman Empire in an increasingly Hellenized social environment. Wars were common, taxation was heavy, and the social infrastructure favoured only a limited few. Out of these oppressive situations, the Governor of Judea still could have declared Judea “The Best Place on Earth.” (The slogan of Vancouver right now is “Best Place on Earth”.) To counter this reality, religious schools of thought emerged to offer leadership to the Jewish people on resisting empire. Four ways of interpretative traditions emerged - Pharisees, Dead Sea Scroll Community, Sadducees, and Zealots. Jesus of Nazareth came along and he offered a fifth interpretation. Despite Jesus’ messages being provocative; they were within the framework of Jewish thoughts and they were strikingly against empire without overtly saying so. Jesus taught us more than just being religious but also how to care for the outcasts and how to counter the presence of empire – forces that dominated people’s lives. Jesus started an Israel Renewal Movement. Jesus chose to conduct his ministry in the margins, with people in the margins, for people in the margins, and in the process, he himself was being marginalized.

The Roman Empire with its powerful armed forces dictated certain social practices that made Jewish ways of life difficult. Out of these social and political contexts that Jesus showed us God’s passion and justice. Jesus showed us God’s compassion for the outcasts and those whose lives have been ripped off by the “gospel according to empire.” Close studying of Jesus’ messages, including Matthew 28, reveals Jesus’ message was not just a religious one but also a political one. For example, by saying all authority in heaven and on earth are given to him and charged people to make disciples on a high mountain, Jesus made a political indictment to the Roman Emperors who preached the gospel according to Caesar. By the way, titles such as “lord,” “Son of God,” “Saviour of the world,” and “divine” were all emperor Augustus Caesar’s titles. Paul’s contemporaries would have no trouble picking up the subversive nature of Paul’s letters – a reason for Paul’s trouble with Rome.

Jesus offered his followers an alternative way to counter the presence of empire. But three hundred and some years later, Constantine made Christianity a friend of empire; and the rest was history. Christianity became not just a friend of empire; Christianity became the religious empire. We need to remember Christianity developed most of its traditional doctrines when

Christianity was the empire. As an empire, the church could legally and literally kill the spirit of questioning with burning flames. Because Christianity and empire was one, during the colonial era, the church used its political status to make non-European lives miserable – as in the case of residential school scandal. Christianity needs to learn this history well and to learn to make rooms for people who are being despised by the dominant social and ecclesial structures. Christians cannot claim to be followers of the One who helped the blinds to see, healed the sick and preached the Good News to the poor without showing compassion to those people whose lives are being ripped off by the establishments and the status quo. When we hear some Christians say it is okay not to welcome certain people in our churches because God did not like those people, we must remember the horror of the Holocaust and the history of racial segregation in the United States.

Empire and Christianity had an unholy history of alliance. Christians need to think hard why we become and behave like an empire. Christians need to critique how and why we become servants of empire, socially, religiously and economically. When Christianity is regarded as a means to attain good life, to raise trouble-free families, and economic security, we lose the spirit of Jesus.

To have faith in Jesus means not to believe a set of statements about Jesus but to have the courage of Jesus to discern the roles of traditions for our times. To re-interpret traditions for the contemporary world is the heart of being a follower of Jesus – something that might cost our middle-class church membership, even our lives! We learn that Jesus reinterpreted the Torah for the Judeans in his times; Paul reinterpreted the meaning of Jesus for Gentiles who have never met Jesus personally; Martin Luther reinterpreted Paul's letter to the Romans to the German people; and Martin Luther King Jr. took his faith in Jesus seriously when he fought social inequality in a country that presumed the way of Jesus. All of these are to show the soul of Christianity is about sharing God's passion for the world that goes beyond just accepting and reciting religious statements and establishments. We learn all these from Jesus, Paul and Martin Luther. Based on this understanding, let me articulate the following view of Christianity. Some people label this view as a liberal view, that means they don't need to pay attention to it. But they are not liberal views but biblical!

1. Abandon the category "conservatives" and "liberals." This category was created in a bygone era that no longer describes our world. Those terms give false dichotomy, provide easy answers, and misrepresent alternative voices. When I started church ministry 18 years ago in Regina, I worked with a senior pastor who considered social drinking was unchristian. If he sees me holding a glass of delicious wine or beer, he would call me a liberal. This term is totally meaningless, but a code word for anyone who wants to delegitimize differences through the position of privilege.

2. Forget true or false. True or false is an elementary exercise we all did. It allows only two choices and one must be wrong. It is another false category colonialism bestows on us that still binds us. Colonial education was binary as it dictates our view of the world in terms of true

or false, black or white, orthodox or heretic, advanced or elementary, civilized or indigenous. Colonial education is also hegemonic because we were educated by authoritative figures to believe that this limiting view of the world was academic, intelligent, and advance. This representation of other was an essential dimension of the relation between western systems of knowledge and the political structure of colonialism. Othering was integral to the colonial domination and imperial ideology. This colonial way of describing the world which Christianity was a partner, makes no room for the voices of protest. This is Constantinian Christianity, not the gospel of Jesus. It does violence in the name of God. The church needs to work toward a theology of multiplicity and the pedagogy of difference that honours the presence of underrepresented voices and experiences. Some want to call this a liberal view. No! This view is NOT liberal. This is biblical Christianity that seeks to reverse the damage of colonial Christianity, a movement that is dear to God's heart.

3. I don't use the word "bias" any longer. This word is loaded with power issues. After two thousand years, the task of Christian learning cannot be about identifying who is right or wrong, true or false, bias or not. It is so colonial that it limits our theological imaginations. Rather, we seek an open-ended inquiry, not knowing what the conclusion could be, but committed to an ongoing discernment through respectful conversation and self-critique trusting God is presence in our journeying. We learn to be Christians through swimming in the ocean of religious traditions and human experiences exercising imagination and memory. Even though Christianity teaches that through Jesus we see God clearly, Christianity does not say Jesus is the only revelation or possesses the whole truth. Some wants to call this a liberal view. No! This is NOT liberal Christianity, but a biblical Christianity that honours the continuous unfolding of the awesomeness of the Creator who is much bigger than our limited theological traditions.

4. Social analyses and seeking social justice are biblical, not liberal. The church does violent to the heart of God when we equate fighting for social justice as liberal theology. A gospel-oriented Christianity needs to move away from the notion that social justice is a footnote to the proclamation of the Gospel. If our proclamation of the Christ event and our love of God do not motivate us to live life that fight discriminations of all kinds, economic exploitations and social inequality of all kinds; to be voices of the voiceless of all kinds, eradicating world hunger everywhere, the Gospel risks becoming an intellectual vacuum.

5. We are dying for a different Christianity after the Holocaust and colonialism. We need pastors and teachers who can teach a different Christianity. This is NOT a Christianity that gives up its traditions but attempts to do justice to the Gospel that costs Jesus' life. We cannot afford to promote a Christianity that presumes anti-Judaism and the damnation of Jews in the 21st century. This is a genuine Christian confession after the Holocaust. We need to relearn how to share Christ and the significance of the cross to the world without colonialism. Contemporary missional Christians ask: What God is doing in the world? Reversing the damage of a black-and-white version of a Constantinian Christianity is part of the answers. Mission today must begin with self-critique. This is NOT a liberal view.