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TOWARD MANY GODS?

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It used to be the case that an Independence Day celebration at the city park, a political rally, the dedication of a public building, or some other civic ceremony in the United States would begin with a prayer offered by a local minister. Organizers then started inviting a cross section of the community's clergy to take part. The Roman Catholic priest would share the podium with, say, the Baptist minister; then they would invite the Jewish rabbi. Today, depending on the religious makeup of the community, a Muslim imam, a Hindu Brahmin, and a Buddhist monk might share the platform with the Christian and Jewish clerics.

That may seem appropriate—after all, in a nation with no established religion, if you invite a Christian pastor to open the city council meeting with a prayer, on what grounds could you refuse to invite a Muslim imam to do the same? America has become a land of great religious diversity. It seems fitting for it to display its religious tolerance and freedom by acknowledging the whole range of faiths that its citizens hold.

Churches, too, are hosting events that feature people of different faiths. Christians who organize prayer breakfasts at the local and national levels now often invite the participation of Jews, Muslims, and Sikhs.¹ Interfaith conferences, church gatherings, and worship services have become commonplace.

This shift in America's civic religion is surely noteworthy. It dovetails with a change in the culture's religious climate, in which all religions are seen as equally valid.

Toward Ecumenicism. In the early twentieth century, the world's various church bodies—especially those in the mainline Protestant denominations—saw the theological differences among themselves as increasingly irrelevant. Christians, it was widely felt, needed to set aside their age-old doctrinal controversies in the name of Christian unity.

Organizations were set up to give this unity institutional form. The National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches brought together different church bodies so that they could work together and speak with one voice. The Consultation on Church Union sponsored extensive discussions in an attempt to resolve doctrinal differences.

A number of American, Canadian, and Australian denominations merged together under the influence of the ecumenical movement. Other traditions that once were at enmity with each other entered into fellowship, sharing communion, pulpits, and even pastoral candidates. In 1977 a group of Catholics and liberal Lutherans announced their accord on justification, ostensibly resolving the issue that sparked the Reformation.

The ecumenical movement was mainly a project of liberal theology that was resisted by evangelicals. The authority of Scripture, the gospel of Christ's redemption, and the very supernatural quality of the Christian faith were minimized and treated as obstacles to church unity. As practiced by the National and World Councils of Churches, Christianity was little more than left-wing political moralism.

The Roman Catholics, while remaining mostly aloof from ecumenical organizations, came to an earth-shaking conclusion at Vatican II, the "ecumenical council," held from 1962 to 1965, that was designed to bring Catholicism into the modern world. The conclusion was that salvation is possible for people who hold to non-Christian religions. Christ is still necessary, they maintained, but by His grace He can save

people who do not know Him. The fact that they can do good works, by the light of their own religions, is a sign of having His grace.

From Ecumenicism to Interfaith. Then postmodernism broke out. Unity is a modernist value. Postmodernists value diversity. Postmodernists prize religious differences. Instead of having to unite in some overall, universal mode of thinking, individuals and groups should celebrate their differences.

Postmodernism also affirms religious relativism. It assumes that religion, morality, and truth itself are personal or cultural “constructions,” not objective categories that are valid for everyone. Whether Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, or animist, each belief is true for that person, or that culture, and everyone’s religious beliefs are equally valid. Trying to convert someone to a different religion is “imposing your beliefs on someone else,” an act of intolerance, arrogance, and oppressive power.

In the new climate of postmodern relativism, the door was opened for the interfaith movement. Liberal Protestants and even some evangelicals embraced a universalism that is far more palatable to contemporary sensibilities than the doctrine that salvation requires faith in Christ.

From Interfaith to Multifaith. In January 2002, Pope John Paul II invited representatives of the world’s religions to come to Assisi, Italy, for a Day of Prayer for Peace, because of the 9/11 attacks. Delegates came from the various branches of Christianity and from the other major world religions. Many from the world’s minor religions —Jains, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Bahais, animists, and even voodoo witch doctors— also joined together to pray.²

The tragedy of 9/11 proved pivotal for the interfaith movement. One would think the terrorism committed in the name of Islam would be evidence that all religions are *not* equally beneficial. Many circles instead saw the problem as religious “fundamentalism” and saw all religious conservatives “who think they have the only truth” as the moral equivalent of Islamic terrorists. According to this view, tolerance was the only answer to terrorism.

Some, such as *Newsweek* religion editor Kenneth Woodward, went so far as to say, “Mere tolerance of other religions is not enough. Even the acceptance of other religions as valid paths to God is insufficient.” Religious people instead must “develop a deep understanding and appreciation of at least one other religion” in addition to their own. In other words, people need to practice at least *two* religions, to balance out the effects of dogmatism.³

This move from interfaith to multifaith, that is, to a new polytheistic religion, is accelerating. It can be seen in the “Re-Imagining” conferences of feminist theologians, who incorporate elements of goddess worship and overtly pagan rites into Christian worship.⁴ It can be seen in new institutions such as Agape International Spiritual Center in Los Angeles, whose structure looks like any 7,000-member Protestant church, but whose theology draws on all religions equally. “Muslims, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, young, old, rich, poor—we cut across all lines,” says its pastor.⁵ Given today’s cultural and religious climate, we should expect these trends to continue.

The Jealous God. The language in the first commandment—“You shall have no other gods before Me” (Exod. 20:3 NIV)—does not mean that we can have other gods, as long as the Lord is “number one.” It means that we are to have no other gods *besides* the Lord.

The Israelites who worshiped the true God at the temple, and then worshiped Canaanite deities at the “high places,” must have seemed very religious. The Israelites who brought the images of the Canaanite deities into the temple, in an effort to be inclusive, must have seemed very tolerant. As the prophets show, however, God’s love is jealous, and His wrath burns against religious “adultery,” to the point of sending His unfaithful people into destruction and exile (Hos. 1–5).

One can make the case that Jews and Christians do worship the same God, the one who inspired the Old Testament. Some now say that Muslims, who trace their lineage to Ishmael, also worship the “God of Abraham” (even though the deity who inspired the Qur’an curses both Christians and Jews). Christians, however, now possess the revelation of the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and since the

incarnation of Christ they know the true God through Him: “No one who denies the Son has the Father” (1 John 2:23 NIV). Jesus could not be more direct, contradicting postmodern relativism point by point: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6 NIV).

Ancient Rome was religiously tolerant. Its polytheistic society would have had no objection to adding Jesus to its pantheon of gods. It believed that Christians could worship their God, as long as they also acknowledged the gods of the culture, but the Christians of the early church would not let Jesus be reduced to just another god among many. They literally would rather die. Rome thus condemned the early Christians as atheists and subversives who were worthy of the death penalty.

The Bible does not forbid learning about or interacting with people of other religions. Polytheism and syncretism, however, were potentially lethal temptations for God’s people from the beginning, and we must guard against the same deadly sins today.

—Gene Edward Veith

NOTES

1. See, for example, Lorri Helfand, “Inclusion Is the Tone of Prayer Breakfast,” *St. Petersburg Times*, May 7, 2004; Ted Olsen, “Is the National Prayer Breakfast Unbiblical?” Weblog, February 6, 2004, Christianity Today, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/105/51.0.html>; Edward Turner, “5th Annual [Los Angeles] Multi-Faith Prayer Breakfast,” Community Day, <http://www.communityday.net/breakfast.html>.
2. Vincenzo Pinto, “World’s Religious Leaders Join Pope in Prayer for an End to Terrorism,” Reuters News Agency, January 25, 2002. The article is available online at <http://www.interfaithstudies.org>, a Web site that contains a host of examples illustrating the points in this article.
3. Kenneth Woodward, “How Should We Think about Islam?” *Newsweek*, December 31, 2001/January 7, 2002, 101. See my book *Christianity in an Age of Terrorism* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 63–75.
4. See, e.g., Donna F. G. Hailson, “Relishing Eve’s Rebellion,” *Christian Research Journal* 21, 1 (1998), <http://www.equip.org/free/DW050.htm>.
5. Cathy Lynn Grossman, “Agape Gives Them ‘New Thought’ Religion,” *USA Today*, November 5, 2001.