

Prologue

American Democracy and our basic moral commitments seem to be up for debate. Our society suddenly appears fragile. Many tenets in our most treasured document, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, are now being honestly challenged for veracity. Have we employed hypocrisy to ignore certain “truths we hold to be self-evident?” And which institutions have excused and enabled such hypocrisy? If all people have intrinsic worth, why should anyone be born into second-class citizenship? Are we all not the children of the same God? We are all created in GOD’S IMAGE. We all are entitled to share God’s love and blessings. **Why is that which is so obvious is so hard to see?**

Some men see things
As they are and ask “Why?”
Others dream things that
Never were and ask
“Why not?”
George Bernard Shaw

Slavery in the Caribbean

Long before the slave trade arrived in the American Colonies, it was widespread in the Caribbean. This experience was critical in shaping the development of the slave trade in the United States. The principal religions involved in this development included the Anglicans, Protestants, Catholics and the Quakers. As various methods for handling the slaves developed, the dominant ideology was called “Protestant Supremacy,” which eventually was called “White Supremacy.” Slave owners conceived of their Protestant identities as fundamental to their status as masters. Slaves had no rights or privileges. Eventually it became clear that race, rather than religion, was the defining feature of bondage.

The Quakers were among the first to question seriously how slaveholding could be compatible with Christian faith and practice. The Quakers believed that the Holy Spirit was present in every human person. The indwelling seed of God could be found in every person. Even the lowest slave was equal to his or her master in the eyes of God. All nations are of one blood. All people, including people of color, have an equal right with other men and women to the exercise of religion. These are truths well before their time.

Protestantism was a core feature of the proslavery movement in antebellum American South. A Christian could not be a slave. Thus, if a slave became a Christian, the slave owner would

lose control of his “property.” Southern slave-owning households claimed that their plantations were modeled on the slave-owning households of the Old Testament. Evangelization was touted as a central justification of slavery. Both Protestants and Catholics saw enslavement as a means to save Africans from their “heathen behavior.”

Unfortunately, the acceptance of slavery by Christianity has a long history. The Roman Church itself owned many slaves. Early Christian theologians consistently reconciled slavery and Christianity. Saint Augustine equated slavery as a metaphor for sin and described freedom as spiritual, rather than material. For Augustine, slavery was both a consequence of sin and a remedy for original sin. Constantine legalized slavery in the Roman Empire. Many other Catholic Saints left no doubt that slavery itself was compatible with Christian life. Many Popes approved of slavery and deemed the activity a crusade. Christianity was central to defining both slavery and servitude. Christian came to be shorthand for “non slave.” The grouping by law provided justification for slavery by suggesting that “slaves” were “heathen” and as a result, they could be legitimately enslaved. Christianity was used as an ethic category that was placed in opposition to the category of slave. Only white people could be Christian.

The Declaration of Independence – 1776

The United States once held 4 million people in involuntary servitude. Christian societies have not been consistently just. Should we really believe that our nation’s founders even had a concern about slavery? The southern colonies dominated the issue. I could believe that Thomas Jefferson sincerely held the words he wrote. And I think that he was probably influenced by Alexander Hamilton. But he was not strong enough to stand alone and put himself at such a financial risk. The other delegates allowed his words to remain because there was no intent to enforce Jefferson’s ideals. They did not accept that all humans have intrinsic worth. (no blacks, no women, etc.) Of the first dozen American presidents only John Adams and John Quincy Adams refused on principle to hold slaves. Washington enslaved over 300 slaves at Mount Vernon. It is not difficult to admit that a major impetus for declaring independence was, for a great number of signees, to ensure slavery.

However, more lofty claims were made in the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their

Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

- Self-evident truths
- In pursuit of inalienable rights
- All humans are created equal
- Commitment to liberty

That statement was a watershed moment in world history. Marking a new age in political thought, it sought to shape the laws of man to ensure that the God-given rights and dignity of every individual would be upheld without discrimination. Whatever the stated intent, the document provided no means for realizing these rights for **ALL**.

Unfortunately, current events again make it clear that one of the most fundamental American tenets - that human beings are created equal - is nowhere near universally accepted. “Are we not all children of the same Father? Are we not all created by the same God?” Malachi 4:4. When we see our neighbors as God sees them, we will treat them as God’s compassion requires. We can no longer merely wait for things to get better; we must act. We should never forget how Christian citizens used spurious Bible references to justify slavery. If we believe that everyone has intrinsic worth, how can there be such a thing as **CHRISTIAN SLAVERY**? Catholic Tradition strongly supported the American experiment. Apparently following tradition is a hard reality in a pluralist society.

The United States has long been home to oppression as much as it has been to liberty. Seeking justice is completely apolitical. It is neither liberal nor conservative. Allowing injustice in the alleged name of Christianity is a mockery, making expressions of faith hypocritical and meaningless. The church in the United States has been sadly complicit in the systemic injustices of white racism. Catholic institutions have only just begun to acknowledge their part in the history of racism in the United States, from slavery to Jim Crow. In fact, the Catholic hierarchy and Christianity were not willing to **be counter-cultural** regarding slavery. **This, I believe, is the MAIN REASON why the United States has yet to fulfill its responsibility to guide its members according to the Gospel message.**

We should express our gratitude for God’s steadfast love and work to imitate God in our interaction with one and another. The church does not exist for its own sake, but for the sake of the Gospel. The Gospel must be the test and filter for all our activity. Without a collective identity

and purpose, there is no way to work effectively for shared goals, including freedom, human dignity, and truth. America has become too individualistic to care for the Common Good. Will we ever be able to unite around shared commitments to freedom, human dignity, and truth? There is some hope.

Most Americans still seem to agree that racism and injustice are bad. There is still an opportunity to come together around common goals. We cannot focus only on a future joy. We must struggle together to achieve the society we want, when all mankind is treated with dignity and respect. Redistribution of wealth was a Judeo-Christian notion long before the emergence of socialism. Any Catholic who claims to defend the sacredness of every human life must combat racism in all its forms (Pope Francis). The U.S Conference of Catholic Bishops called racism a “real and present danger,” not a mere relic of the nation’s past. The church must speak prophetically and not be compromised. It must witness to the Gospel in its entirety. There is a white supremacy in the history of the Catholic church and Christianity that needs to be dismantled.

A Way Forward: God is Greater than Religion

Bearing witness to the Holy Spirit will help us to see the importance of not limiting our faith to our own faith community, to the boundaries of one domination and instead to allow God’s teachings to be the cornerstone of my faith.

Breathe on me, breath of God,
Fill me with life anew
That I may love the things you love,
And do what you would do.
(Text Edwin Hatch, 1835-1889)

Religion is evidence of mankind’s desire to know God. This basic desire to know God has resulted in the development of many religions. As I have believed for many years, the methods used in the past are incapable of developing the catalyst to stimulate religious unity through diversity. Thus, what could be this catalyst?

It seems that a major shift in how the objectives of religion are accomplished is required. A relationship of how mankind relates to God is imperative. Instead of focusing on how badly man stands in relationships to God, let’s look back to creation to assess mankind’s value to God and to be loved by God.

- God is one God.
- Creator of only love and goodness
- Indwelling within each of us.
- Actively present within the world.
- Always kind and merciful
- God shows no partiality.
- We are each born worthy of God's abundant graces and love.
- We are each a Beloved Child of God, in whom God is well pleased.
- We are each made in the image and likeness of God.
- Eternally begotten to willingly do the will of God, by performing Acts of Kindness for others.
- We each have the power and the authority to forgive sins.
- God does not desire sacrifice and offering.
- God desires that we each live in accordance with his love, which has been written upon our heart.
- We each have been anointed to bring good news to the poor.
- We each have been sent to proclaim release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and to proclaim God's praises
- Here we are God. We have come to do your will.

We can do this! Stop telling us that we are not worthy. It is now too easy for any religious person to cop out of God's work, for this approach has worked up to now. We have not been taught to believe that God (and the church) really expects us to become like God. Most sermons avoid the tough points and demand no call to action. In my experience, there is a strong tendency for religions to seek unity only through attempting to develop a "forced" uniformity, usually favoring only their own beliefs. Saint John Paul II has remarked that it is "necessary for humanity to achieve unity through plurality" (also diversity). Unity through diversity believes that there can be more than one means to accomplish the same result or objective. Since God created diversity in numerous forms, diversity is good, incredibly good.

The Divinity of Humanity

We are each worthy to receive God's abundant blessings because God has created us in his image and likeness. We each can forgive sins. Jesus asks us, no, he commands us, to forgive. We are especially urged to forgive those we do not love. In fact, it is an obligation. We are each a beloved child of God, in whom God is well pleased. Jesus is significant in our lives. Jesus awakens us to the truth of our oneness with God, the one who saves us from the sin/death that consists of

living in ignorance of the divinity of humanity. In this sense he is truly the savior of all who put their faith in him, that is, entrust their lives to him.”

“Imagine,” John Lennon

I have always been moved by John Lennon’s song “Imagine.” To me it seems to offer hope where there is misunderstanding, hunger, hate, greed, and war. What is the one thing that can bring religious unity and still respect freedom of religion? **Could it be A Brotherhood of Man?**

Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man

Imagine all the people sharing all the world
You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one.
John Lennon

Father Aldoldo Nicholas, S. J. speaks of forming “a new kind of humanity that is musical.” In doing so he “is drawing our attention to a deep spiritual malaise at the root of the present human predicament.” He is calling for a “companionship of equals.” Father Nicholas is asking all of us to image the future with Catholics, Protestants, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and, we can safely presume, not a few agnostics and atheists, forming a new humanity. All of whom are linked directly with the movement of the Holy Spirit in our time, to find ways “to meld our differences into a vital purpose.” Now is the time to create “**A NEW HUMANITY**” for the benefit of a suffering world. (Adolfo Nicolas, S.J., “A New Kind of Humanity,” *America Magazine* July 2020)

Personal

I grew up in Mobile, Alabama, a city of about 300,000 residences. The Catholic population made up 25-30 percent of the population. This is very unusual for a southern city. Thus, there were (and are) many Catholic churches, schools, hospitals, and a very public Catholic expression of some “faith” (not the Gospel).

Unfortunately, Mobile was just as racist as any other southern city. The Catholic faith was sadly complicit in the systemic injustices of white racism. African Americans were segregated,

overlooked, or looked down on by the white Christians. You could almost touch the hatred and vindictiveness expressed by white people.

There was no interest in being counter-cultural to provide respect and dignity to Black people. (The Hispanics would have been treated the same if they had been in Mobile at the time.) I will always feel embarrassed by the lack of Christ-like behavior from the Bishop, priests, religious, and laity. Unfortunately, given a chance to do it again, I believe their actions would be the same.

James W. Connolly,
Guest Contributor,
Austin, Texas,
Essay Based Upon a Lifetime of Personal Religious Reflections.

8/16/2020