

By C. ERIC LINCOLN

## Aspects of American Pluralism

Catholics, Protestants and Jews constitute the reigning religious triumvirate in America, and so perceive themselves; and while all three groups have black constituencies of varying degrees of significance, the collective significance of Blacks as Catholics, Protestants and Jews is considered insufficient to be a meaningful factor in assessing the position of the religious mainstream in America. Hence, any serious discussion of religion in America almost inevitably becomes a discussion about "religion" and "*black* religion." Civil religion is not excluded, for in talking about civil religion, we are in a larger sense talking about the peculiar establishment of a religious pluralism as an epiphenomenon behind an official posture of sectarianism and the alleged separation of church and state. It was once believed that civil religion could never be a factor of consequence in the United States, for that possibility had been anticipated and forever precluded by a provision of the First Amendment, to wit: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or preventing the free exercise thereof."

The most obvious intent of the First Amendment was to separate church and state. The intent was to make it legally certain that America never had an "established" church, as was the common practice among certain European nations. But the effect of the law was even more profound: in refusing to favor one church, the state put all churches and all faiths upon a common ground. Legally, their particularities of doctrine and ritual rendered none an advantage over any other. *Vis-a-vis* the coercive power of the state they shared a common prerogative and a common impotence. They could sow to a common parish — as broad as the limits and the jurisdiction of the state — but no one could be penalized for choosing this creed and rejecting that, or choosing none at all. At least such was the theory which underlay the notion of separation. That America in fact developed her own "civil religion" retaining many of the salient features of "establishment" and developing others more compatible to their peculiar interests is a matter notwithstanding.<sup>1</sup>

The point is that while the very circumstances of the founding of America encouraged a proliferation of competing creeds,<sup>2</sup> the notion that a resulting multiplicity of denominations and sects would someday pose a serious threat to the effectiveness of the common faith, or on the other hand an opportunity for making an historic witness by rendering whole the Body of Christ through effective church union might present itself, did not seem to have widespread currency in former times.

<sup>1</sup> See Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in American," in *Religion In America*, edited by W. G. McLoughlin and Robert N. Bellah, Boston, 1968.

<sup>2</sup> See Sidney E. Mead who reminds us that our mainline denominations were "the direct descendants of the national churches of Europe . . . formed in the old national church crucible," each concerned to preserve its sense of identity. "Pluralism and Sectarianism," *The Religion of the Republic*, Elwyn W. Smith. Philadelphia, 1968.



Indeed, there were those who staked their confidence in the hope and the expectation that the travail of sectarianism might ultimately prove the salvation of the church universal; that out of the crucible of denominationalism might come a refinement of the faith so perfect and so pure as to transcend all traditional efforts to speak the faith effectively to man in all his conditions of existence.<sup>3</sup> Such a hope was current a hundred years ago, and there can be little doubt that many scholars and churchmen would agree that America has indeed developed an indigenous religion, but they may well part company over the quality of its presuppositions and whether it is more, or less, effective in its appeal to man in his universal condition.

If religious pluralism occupied so minuscule a place in the thinking of those who founded and shaped this commonwealth, then any notion of a possibility of social pluralism received even less projection. There was always a powerful faction of Americans dedicated to keeping the breed pure, but how to accomplish this without jeopardizing other values, not the least of which were personal wealth, status and leisure, posed a problem which was never satisfactorily resolved for the exclusionists. There were those whose motives were less gross, to be sure, but be that as it may, neither the portals of slavery nor the floodgates of immigration were ever representative of a broad-gauge, innate American commitment to unconditional altruism. The slave block and the Statue of Liberty alike presupposed that those who came to America would accept the niche already cut for them in the existing social order by pre-existent forces operating for the preservation of established prerogatives. . . . Those who landed at Bedloe's Island in New York Harbor, like those who landed at Norfolk and Baltimore and Charleston all the centuries before, were faced with a *fait accompli*, the principal difference being that the descendants of those landed at New York could in time be melted into assimilation (if they learned the language and anglicized their names), while those whose forebears came by way of Charleston and Baltimore, were to remain an underclass in perpetuity even though they had the right names, gratuitously provided, and though they spoke the language with the perfection of generations of hearing it at its best and at its worst.

The world is smaller now, and to a notable extent the restructuring of the ideologies which shape the conditions of human survival is under way. The smug notions of religious or political manifest destiny for favored races and chosen peoples, while far from being dead, are no longer in the blue book of fashionable ideas. But they do continue to lurk like spirits in the closets and the attics of the cult of true believers for whom the notion of sharing anything with the lesser breeds is tantamount to heresy. More than that, contemporary dialogue on the merits of the issue is still for many a gracious exposition of *noblesse oblige*, for they do not seriously anticipate any of the changes they talk about, either in their time or in any time to come.

<sup>3</sup> See Philip Schall, *America: Sketch of Its Political, Social and Religious Character*, pp. 80-81. Quoted in Elwyn Smith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 263.



What then, is the hassle all about? It is about the hopes and dreams of passionate men who long to see the church and the society made whole for its own sake; and it is about the anxieties and the fears of the self-concerned who recognize in diversity *ad libitum* the spectre of chaos and the eventual re-encroachment of the jungle. We make a brave showing of living under the dictum that "all we have to fear is fear itself," but what we seem to fear most is each other. In a society where restraint is equated with senility and discipline is a dirty word; where tradition is the mode of the establishment and moral standards are the symbols of antiquity, where everyone is intent upon doing his own thing and one man's thing is as right and as relevant as another's; where new solutions to old problems flicker on and off the public consciousness like lights on a pin ball machine; where one's neighbor, one's friend, one's child or one's spouse may at any moment revert to a community-shattering individualism, denying the sanctity and the relevance of the shared values upon which the solidarity of family and group identity is commonly based, then some concern about the presuppositions of our co-existence does seem to be in order.

This is a society at odds with itself, and in such a society the minimum possible effective social arrangement is a condition of pluralism. Pluralism can be both *incidental* and *accommodative*. An *incidental* pluralism is a temporary condition of social equilibrium in which contending social forces are momentarily stabilized through some fortuitous balancing of interests not resulting from the conscious, rational, mutual efforts of the several constituencies.

An incidental pluralism is not an optimum social arrangement, as it is likely to be characterized by either volatility or by narcosis. In the case of the former, the abrasiveness of the social flux, the mutual uncertainties and insecurities of varying constituencies jockeying for advantage, the absence of agreement or understanding defining the parameters of the critical particularities which constitute self-perceived identity and exclusiveness, all contribute to a situation which is never far from explosion. The community's capacity to absorb or to deflect "anti-social incidents" is sharply diminished, and unacceptable behavior which may originate with individuals responding to personal motivations is likely to be charged to the group with which the individual is identified. "Retaliation" or "chastisement" is then directed toward the group rather than at the individual. The volatility of incidental pluralism is exacerbated by the high levels of tension which seem to be its inevitable corollary, and people living under such conditions of anxiety tend to adopt *ad hoc* attitudes about life and the circumstances of their existence. The dimension of depth is noticeably absent from personal planning and from social relationships, and the common expectation that "things will blow" momentarily, or that "the bottom will drop out any day" discourages a more mature concern about the meaning and the possibilities of the situation as the situation in fact exists.

Although volatility represents a far more common syndrome, an incidental pluralism may register at the other end of the spectrum and



display signs of social narcosis instead. The root cause is the same: the temporary unassisted stabilization of forces in contention — these forces representing the varied interests of the several constituencies involved. The difference is that the situation is merely quiescent rather than explosive, because the energy-potential for a sudden eruption has already been temporarily drained away and dissipated. The ensuing condition of torpor may give the illusion of a healthy, peaceful coexistence, when in fact, all of the elements of social insalubrity are present, contention being muted or avoided only because some more all-encompassing concern such as war or some natural disaster has momentarily preempted the concern for preeminence among the contending groups. The implication should be clear: social groupings presuppose a consciousness of identity; identity seeks in turn to express itself, indeed, to delineate itself in terms of what is particular and unique to itself. Pluralism describes a situation in which self-conscious social groupings are in significant social contact and enjoy a common physical space. *Incidental pluralism* suggests that while the groups involved are self-conscious about their respective identities, they are momentarily deterred from the assertion of particularity, either by the very volatility of the situation, or because of a temporary state of weakness induced by the over-expenditure of energy and concern directed toward some presently more-enveloping threat. The contentiousness characteristic of self-conscious groups is of course still present, waiting a return to “normalcy” when it will reassert itself with the reduction of the common threat.

The picture most ordinarily presented to the mind when one talks about a pluralistic society is one in which self-conscious groups, aware of their own differences, are prepared, or at least make some effort to live with the differences of others. This is what I mean by *accommodative pluralism*. It is the realization that the freedom of one group to be itself, to call attention to its unique, identifying characteristics, and to celebrate its particularities depends upon the freedom of other constituencies to do the same. *Accommodative pluralism* presupposes the willingness and the ability of contending groups to be relaxed in the presence of diversity; to conform to those basic essentials of comity without which no community can exist; to have an enlightened self-interest in facilitating, (or at least not hindering) the fulfillment of contending groups in their search for the peculiar values they consider critical to their perception of who they are and why. Wilbur Katz of the University of Wisconsin Law School puts it this way:

A religiously pluralistic society, then, is one in which principal religious groups not only claim freedom for themselves, but affirm equal freedom for others, whatever their beliefs may be . . . Individuals are free to doubt or to believe . . . The model pluralism is also one in which there is a sensitizing to the differing needs of varying groups and a disposition to accommodate these needs.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Wilbur G. Katz and Harold P. Southerland, “*Religious Pluralism and the Supreme Court*,” in McLoughlin and Bellah, *Op. Cit.*, p. 269.



Accommodative pluralism, then derives from a conscious effort on the part of contending constituencies to protect each other's uniqueness in order that each may enjoy its own. It is toleration for the enjoyment of toleration. But more than that, it involves the active championing of the right to be different, a right which *ipso facto* must be extended to others in order to be realized within one's own group. Hence, a condition of diversity within a larger system of uniformity is made possible, and the total social fabric is strengthened through the common interest in maintaining certain private prerogatives, viz; the right to be different, and to express that difference within parameters which are commonly agreed upon.

Accommodative pluralism is a practical way of ordering a society conscious of its diversity, but it does not speak effectively to the hard questions which underlie the presumption of uniqueness, the parameters of authority, the unity of truth. Rather, pluralism raises these issues and then makes its determinations at the level of pragmatism rather than at the level of something more final and absolute. It could be argued that pluralism is politics at its best — a rapprochement with the presently possible rather than the hopeless pursuit of the philosophically ideal. If we ask "what is man?" and we receive an answer that man is an exponent of mankind, and that mankind is one; if we ask "what is the Church?" and we are answered that the Church is the body of Christ and that Christ is one, we have been given philosophical answers to fundamental questions. Pluralism asks by implication *which* one, but never presses for an answer. It leaves the resolution of the problem to the inner councils of the true believers of its several constituencies, and each constituency is free to act (within limits agreed upon) as though *it* were the one.

But if mankind is truly one, if the Church is truly one, there are consequences of unity which do not properly lend themselves to an expression of diversity. This is where the pragmatics of pluralism part company with all those who worry about the true meaning of oneness, the deeper implications of unity. It is an old question. The notion of a common fold is at least as old as Christendom, and one fold implies one shepherd, one leadership, one rule, and one way. But Christianity is the fruit of an evolutionary process, which over the span of nineteen centuries succeeded in dissuading man of the possibility of his uniqueness in favor of the uniqueness of God. Certainly man does not come naturally to the conclusion that he is one with all other men. In fact, most primitive societies learned to think of themselves as being unique long before they accorded uniqueness to their gods. The function of the gods was to serve the people, indeed to protect the uniqueness of the tribe, the clan, the race, the cult. Other peoples had other gods, but always the gods belonged to the people rather than the people to the gods. It was the people who were unique, and in practically every primitive culture we know about, there were tribal names declaring their possessors to be *the* people. All others were counterfeits of the real, beyond the pale of humanity.



The notion of God having a "chosen people," was a radical departure from the ancient tradition of the people having a chosen god, or gods. But even so, being "chosen" by God reinforced rather than weakened the notion of tribal, or racial or cultic uniqueness. It simply meant that a reciprocal relation had been established. The chosen god in choosing the people had ratified what the people had always preferred to believe: that they were different from other men, and their difference made a difference. The possibility that God might extend the category of *his* chosen to universal proportions would of course be resisted, because such a possibility posed an unacceptable threat to the notion of the uniqueness of those already chosen. This resistance could be dissipated only if it could be shown that those subsequently chosen were, in all essentials, of the same tribal, racial or cultic genre as those who first received the promise.

Learning to live with diversity is not one of man's most representative accomplishments. In fact, it is one of his more characteristic failures. The need to reduce all heterogeneity to a manageable uniformity, (best illustrated in terms of religion and politics by the medieval church and classical communism respectively), is well documented. The question is "why?" Intellectually and philosophically it probably has to do with man's understanding of truth — truth as consistency. Truth as the one and final expression of reality. Truth cannot be divided. It must be one. If A is true, and B is different from A, then B cannot be true. And by extension, if B is not true then B is false and ought to be suppressed. Or at the very least, what is false (and not true) should not be permitted to enjoy the prerogatives of truth. Similarly, if truth is consistency, then truth is whole and cannot be divided against itself. Perfection is oneness. Wholeness. Uniformity. Whatever divides the oneness of an entity destroys the perfection that makes it what is. "A house divided against itself cannot stand" because a divided house has lost its integrity, its integrality — that quality of wholeness essential to its being itself rather than something different. To divide is not merely to weaken. To divide is to change the nature of a thing; to compromise its identity; to perjure its perfection; to make it something other than what is was, or what it was properly intended to be.

When this kind of reasoning is applied to the Church the "scandal of sectarianism" is immediately apparent. Sectarianism balkanizes the Church and leaves its truth open to pollution. If truth is one, to speak with many voices is not necessarily to confuse the message, but the risk is great. It is for this reason that all those who share an absolutistic interpretation of truth are unmollified by the relative effectiveness of pluralism, for if pluralism does not divide the truth, it grants respectability to what is not truth, and grants every claim equal accommodation in the marketplace of religious ideas.

In contemporary America any argument about religious absolutism is, of course, bound to be academic. There are those who do weep for the broken body of Christ, but for the most part they sorrow in silence.



Pluralism is taken for granted. It is its own establishment. "Predominant Protestantism" no longer predominates in any significant way, but with its own vast brood of religious sub-entities it shares an easy understanding with those other great religions from which it is descended. Religious pluralism in America then means a mutually accommodative relationship among Judaism, Christianity, and "Americanity." Americanity is a new expression of an old faith, or perhaps it is more accurate to say that it is the vigorous offspring of a marriage of old faiths. It is the religion of the American culture,<sup>5</sup> "the religion of the Republic . . . the 'national religious self-understanding' that embodies and cherishes the ideals, aspirations and hopes that have been traditionally associated with America."<sup>6</sup> It is the natural child, it has been argued, of the Enlightenment and evangelical protestantism,<sup>7</sup> from whose twin fountains flow the clear and cold waters of our national heritage. . . . That the waters have long since been polluted is a fact too tedious to mention. The Enlightenment in America was damped out by the issue of slavery before the flame was fairly set to the wick. It never recovered, except as a ghostly chimera, a wasted reminder of what America could have been if indeed we could have been less blind to the light of the Enlightenment, and if evangelical protestantism could have been somewhat less evangelical and somewhat more humane.

Americanity is the semi-secular, unofficial but characteristic religion to which most Americans appeal when an appeal to religion is indicated. It is the religion most Americans *feel* when they feel any religion at all. It transcends the classical sectarian delineations and joins Protestant, Catholic and Jew in a single communion in a way no classical religion ever could. Those who think well of America's culture religion see it as "a creative, dynamic, and self-critical national religion that gives transcendent meaning and a high set of moral values to individual Americans, and produces just, humane goals for the nation."<sup>8</sup> Others see it as a "third force,"<sup>9</sup> "a force that is capable of significantly altering a culture, or that is symptomatic of a significant new shift in the dynamics of a culture."<sup>10</sup> The most important aspect of this "third force" (with Christianity and Judaism) is held to be its "pluralistic quality."<sup>11</sup> Indeed it is suggested that this third force is "the pietistic spirit of American culture itself," involving the American sense of mission and world leadership for the containment of communism, our national sense of charity and stewardship, and "the sense of religious commitment and ideals that Americans inscribe to democracy and their way of life."<sup>12</sup>

Other observers of the contemporary religious scene are not quite so charitable in their assessment of Americanity, our third force national

<sup>5</sup> McLoughlin and Bellah, *Op. Cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>6</sup> Elwyn Smith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 268.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 269.

<sup>8</sup> Elwyn Smith, *Op. Cit.*, p. 268.

<sup>9</sup> McLoughlin and Bellah, *Op. Cit.*, p.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 52.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 66.



culture religion. There will be little challenge to its pluralistic implications insofar as its attractiveness to Protestants, Jews and Roman Catholics is concerned, for as Will Herberg has suggested, "to be a Protestant, a Catholic or a Jew are today the alternative ways of being an American."<sup>13</sup> That is precisely the point: the confusion of national goals and values with religious goals and values has produced in America a pseudo-religious monster with the most grotesque social and religious aberrations. How else can one explain our quite primitive racial and economic practices, which if they are not officially sanctioned by the Church, are the common expressions of our most respectable private citizens and national leaders without any consequences to their religious status or respectability? This all-too-cozy bundling between what appears to be national policy and "western religion" laughs at the alleged separation of church and state; and well it may, for it grants to civil power the support and respectability of religion without charging that power with a commensurate responsibility. It is little wonder that such antiquated notions as "American manifest destiny" and "the white man's burden" persist and flourish, although they may be couched in such cryptic contemporary jargon as "the containment of communism," or the "benign neglect" of Blackamericans.

A scant decade and-a-half ago Henry Pitt Van Dusen wrote an article for *Life Magazine*<sup>14</sup> which was widely considered as a warning to traditional religion to "shape up" or expect to see its influence in the world increasingly overshadowed by the rapidly multiplying sects which make up the hinterland of "standard Protestantism." While Roman Catholicism and standard Protestantism were barely holding their own, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Churches of Christ, the Seventh Day Adventists and the like were flourishing. Van Dusen saw these "fringe" groups as a "third force." Any who were alarmed at his findings fifteen years ago would have no present cause for comfort looking at today's statistics about church membership and religious influence. Everywhere, the national offices of the major denominations are curtailing their operations and lamenting the wasting away of their congregations. And everywhere the "fringe-sects" Van Dusen talked about have swollen memberships, new confidence, and an increasing sense of mission in the world. But for all their successes in keeping religion relevant while the standard denominations have been laboring to keep it popular, the fringe sects are not really the third force. Not yet. Americanness, the religion of our national culture is firmly fixed in that office. And it will probably remain so for a long time to come, for as the sects gain power and influence, a benign civil order will be waiting to accept their compromise.

New to the professional churchman, but not to the faith, is something called "black religion," an expression Dr. Van Dusen would almost certainly have included in his "third force" collective had he known of its

<sup>13</sup> See Herberg, *Protestant Catholic, Jew*, (New York 1955) p. 274.

<sup>14</sup> "The Third Force's Lesson for Others" (June 9, 1958), pp. 122-23.



existence. Oddly enough, while black religion has little likelihood of usurping any of the three religious powers which now protect the conscience and the morals of the commonwealth, because of the peculiar racial understanding in America, black religion may well become a "fourth force." And soon. Excluded from the white churches in the past, demeaned and segregated where they were not excluded, contemporary black Christians are hardly enthusiastic over present efforts to include them in a "united" Church. They listen to the arguments, but in the black vernacular, "It's Nation Time," and they're going to "take care of business." Or, "they've got it all tacked down," and they're going to "rang their own thang" for awhile. Of course it goes without saying that anybody who wants to ring his own thing has to pay the price of the ringing. Consequently, some Blacks are going to be Protestants or Roman Catholics before being "black." And some are going to be "Americans" before they are anything else, at least in their own interpretation of reality. And in this approach to identity they replicate the self-perceptions of millions of other Americans. They accept, and consider themselves, if not truly integral, at least statistically within one of the three standard categories of American pluralism. And thereon hangs a tale of irrepressible irony, for they are seldom so considered by those whose identities they want to share. To the census makers, the statisticians, the sociologists of religion and white America generally, there are white and "Negro sects," and there is religion and "Negro denominations;" and the two are not necessarily the same.

Black religion isn't really bothered by the distinctions. In fact, contemporary black religion insists that distinctions *must* be made between itself and the religion of the white slavemasters, by which it means the prostitution of the classical faith by American tribal and economic self interest. Rejecting the "Negro" tag as one of the more insidious agents in the vast psychological arsenal of white racism, black religion is self-consciously "black." Its claims to an identity as a separate way of faith rest upon the presumed uniqueness of the black experience in America and elsewhere in the world, and upon the theological understanding that God is on the side of the oppressed. And who are the oppressed? You don't have to take the "A train" to find out anymore. They'll let you know.

Contemporary black theology has seized the initiative for staking out a home turf for the black revolution, and God himself has been made Minister of War. The values at stake are in the category of the ultimate, and the strategy is to make the necessary alliances with whomever has felt the hard jack-boot of racism, and then to go down on Whitey — hard, and without compromise. The new black believers have declared that they will not ever again be deceived by the white Christian's false piety and spurious love, for love is not a category for which white Christianity has a demonstrated understanding.

Certainly there is no convenient slot in the existing parameters of American pluralism into which this new aggressive black religion can



be comfortably fitted. It is at odds with the traditional expressions of the faith, and it is certainly not in the mood of stereotypical "Negro religion." Some black theologians (and some theologians who are white), have with varying degrees of ambivalent caution advanced the notion of the Black Church as the "saving remnant" in Christendom — not just in America, but wherever the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is acknowledged. The suspicion seems to be that Christianity as a "Western" religion, or more precisely, as *the* religion of the West, has become inordinately entangled in the preservation and promotion of the cultural values of the West to the end that the peculiar universal values of the faith have been hopelessly submerged. From this perspective, Americanness is unique only with reference to its garishness, but it has its counterparts in every citadel of Western culture. The uniqueness of the Black Church inheres not in its blackness per se, and not in any claim to being non-Western, but in the peculiar experience of being in the West and of the West but excluded from participating in, and possibly corrupted by, the salience of Western culture during the critical centuries in which the ascendancy of the West was confirmed, and the culture-cast of the West was finally determined. In being left out while forced to look on, the religious perspectives and the spiritual experience of black people in the West cannot be identical to that of their white counterparts. The possibility that their own degradation through the instrumentalities of Western power endowed them with a more compassionate perspective on humanity and a less febrile memory of the catechism of the faith ought not to be dismissed summarily and without consideration, as so many possibilities involving black people have been dismissed.

In any case, the notion of a "saving remnant" aside, (for there may not be a remnant worth saving), it seems quite clear that the Black Church intends to assume a relevance in the society not heretofore accorded it, and that if it is successful, pluralism in America will be augmented, or supplemented, or sub-divided by a "fourth force," and the politics of God will be searching for a new rapprochement with the politics of the culture under the easy canopy of reciprocal accommodation.

