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Pressure's off for Protestants now that they're not the majority

Bill Tammeus | Oct. 31, 2012 A small c catholic

I have more experience being a minority than you might think would be the case with a tall white American male in his 60s.

I once attended a grammar school in India in which I was the only American. I also have attended many worship services of religions not my own. Beyond that, how many German/Swedish-American Cubs fans do you know?

So I'm prepared to be a Protestant today in America, where, for the first time in our national history, we Protestants no longer make up a majority of our population, a new study shows [1].

Not too many decades ago, the United States was a landslide for Protestantism. We ruled. Quite literally.

Thank God those days are over, though I think a U.S. Supreme Court with six Catholics and three Jews seems a little unrepresentative. But I don't want you Catholics feeling sorry for me just because Protestants today make up only a plurality of the American religious landscape [2], not a majority.

I feel about this turn of events the way I feel about the world entering what many scholars call the post-Christian era: I feel relieved. I feel glad not to be in charge any more. I feel liberated and I think the church now is freer to be the church.

When we Protestants ran the country, we did much good, but there was a disastrous tendency to confuse religion with patriotism. We often thought our duties as citizens were somehow automatically in harmony with our religious obligations as disciples of Jesus Christ.

So it was difficult for us to offer useful, penetrating critiques of our culture, our government and our national traditions. For instance, some Protestants went bonkers when the Supreme Court declared organized prayer in public schools unconstitutional. Beyond that, we began to act as if capitalism were a divinely ordered economic system and that criticizing it for its tendency to oppress people in various ways was heresy. Heck, even acknowledging that tendency often still is seen as heresy.

But now we Protestants are freed from the obligations of defending the status quo. Now we can be the peasants, the dissenting voices. We can more easily play the role of court jester, which means shining a spotlight on whatever has gone bad and needs fixing, though it would help if we learned to do that with as much humor as court jesters have.

Except for two years of my boyhood spent in India, I grew up in a small town in northern Illinois in which Protestants dominated. There was a sizable Catholic community, to be sure, but everybody knew that in Woodstock, the civic power and responsibility rested with the Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, Baptists and other Protestants.

Our one Jewish family certainly knew that, given that it took years for those Protestants to give Dr. B.B.

Neuchiller practicing privileges at the only hospital in town.

It turns out to be a great relief not to feel like we're responsible for everything anymore. And yet it behooves us Protestants now to remember that America must be governed and led by a broad coalition of people of various (and no) faiths.

Which means we have to learn to listen, to be mindful of the traditions and ways of looking at the world that do not come out of a Protestant mindset. We will have to learn to collaborate and be good partners, knowing we no longer control all the votes.

This is the new America, and I'm glad I've lived long enough to see it. Do I still want people to join my Presbyterian congregation [3] and, by default, become Protestants? You bet. And if Protestants can learn how to be true disciples of Christ effectively in this new century, maybe one day, our population percentage will rise above 50 again.

But for now, we get to work as less-powerful partners. And that can teach us a great deal.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog [4] for *The Star*'s website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust [5]*. Email him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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