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Christian, Secular or Something Else Entirely

Joan Chittister | Mar. 6, 2007 From Where I Stand

Here's a tip: If you want to know before your friends do what may well be one of the major questions of the 21st century, keep your eye on two new documents. The first is the Berlin Declaration to be released by E.U. President Angela Merkel within the month. The second is the Brussels Declaration, a statement by prominent European academicians, community leaders, and national and European politicians, which disagrees with the tenets included in the Berlin Declaration and which has already been released in response to it.

These two declarations could engage Western society for years to come -- and with no small consequences. But don't expect either one of them to raise too much discussion at the club next week.

The fact is that the most important things going on in the world are often neither the most obvious things nor the most publicized ones. I doubt, for instance, that the Enlightenment philosophers whose ideas were the undergirding of either the revolutionary American Constitution or the bloody French Revolution that followed it were much in the news before either of those events.

Now, we may be in the throes of another civilization-shaping moment in history without even being aware of it.

Oh, there have been scuffles along the way, of course, that could have alerted us to the problem.

In this case, the first shots fired over the bow have been simple ones. Court cases in the United States have argued for the admissibility of religious icons in U.S courtrooms, and students have sued for the right to pray on school grounds. I've got a friend, for instance, who used to write to me regularly about the question of prayer in schools. This is a good man who cares deeply for the country, is concerned about the moral education of young people and who simply assumes that if schools, all of them -- public as well as private -- returned to the practice of daily prayer, our whole society would be a lot better off.

He thinks it is outrageous -- a measure of everything else that is wrong about our civic morality -- that we have gotten to the point where prayer in schools can possibly be considered a breach of the principles of separation of church and state.

However, when I wrote back to ask him whose prayers he wanted said -- Jewish, Mormon, Muslim or Baptist and how we would decide which it would be -- he stopped the conversation.

The second moment in the new concern about the definition of modern society came quietly enough from Pope Benedict XVI when in his inaugural homily to the world, he called on Europe to remember its Christian roots and foreswear what he called "rampant relativism."

But perhaps the decisive political moment in the subject came when Angela Merkel, presiding president of the European Union, a confederation of 26 European States -- now, incidentally, considering the membership of Muslim Turkey -- calls in the Berlin Declaration for an inclusion in the E.U. Constitution that "recognizes Europe's Christian roots and the acknowledgement of Europe's Christian God."

The question raised by the Brussels Declaration is whether such a move is really good for religious freedom or not.

The Brussels Declaration makes two points: First, that the ideal environment for all religions is not the theocratic state -- the state that defines itself as identified by some single religion -- but the secular state. Secondly, the Brussels Declaration points out that secularism and atheism are not synonyms. The secular state, the document argues, is not anti-religion. It is not atheistic. It is, instead, anti-establishmentarianism. It identifies itself with no particular religion and so it privileges no single religion. As a result, the document declares, it protects the right of all religions to practice without recrimination.

We may never have needed the distinctions more. Western society is becoming highly multicultural and polyglot in its religions. The most rapidly expanding population in the United States, for example, is not Christian but Muslim. The Christian nature of Western society that could once be taken for granted is becoming increasingly blurred. So what are we now -- really?

Clearly, the issue, however understated in the public mind, has the incendiary capacity to divide a nation. The question may be a quiet one, but it is not an unimportant one. On its answer may well rest the character of nation states in times to come. Are we Christian countries that admit non-Christians to citizenship? Or are we secular states that protect the practice of all religions but identify the state with no single one of them?

The first response, of course, is to gasp. How can anyone even begin to question the place and impact of Christianity in the West? But "place and impact" are not the question. The question is whether or not Western governments have their foundation in uniquely Christian principles and ideals or on the ideals and ethical principals common to all the great religions. Is the Christian law, for instance, the basis for Western law as *sharia* is the basis of Islamic states?

And if so, what happens if and when another cultural-religious heritage becomes the ethos of the region. Then will those laws change?

Is government incapable of justice unless it is identified with a given religion? Or, alternatively, is a government capable of being truly, legally just if it is identified with a given religion?

The question is not a very exciting one -- at least not at first glance. But it may be one of the most important Western questions since the writing of the U.S. Constitution.

So, does it really matter now whether we declare ourselves to be a Christian government or a secular government? I wondered that myself till I noticed Note 1 of the Brussels Declaration which contends "that the Muslim Council of Britain has published a 72-page book of 'Guidance for British Schools' to 'accommodate' Muslim students. These steps include segregation of the sexes, that Muslim dress code should take precedence over a school's own dress code, that school restaurants should serve only *halal* meat and end swimming, dancing and other activities."

From where I stand, it seems to me that we better not leap too quickly to determine if we see ourselves as a Christian state or as a secular state without a great deal of thought. As the demographic profile of the nation changes, we may all have prayer in schools. But which prayers they'll be as religion and cultures shift in their influence could be anybody's guess.

Maybe we should start to pay more attention than we are to this very quiet, unexciting question.

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