Secular Pluralism: The Competitive gods And The Christian Ethic

O.T. 1 Kings 18: 17-40
N.T. Matthew 5: 1-12
By
David P. Bridges
June 1, 2008
First Presbyterian Church
Roanoke, Virginia

Secular Pluralism is a defining description of American culture. Secular Pluralism can be defined as: a system which is not under the control of any religion or singular belief system, nor does it give primacy to any religion. I can recall taking Reformed Theology under Professor Louis Weeks at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary. Weeks described American culture as one that in every small town of America there was a Christian drinking fountain which all the faithful communally drank from together. In fact in all towns in America there was only one Christian source of water.

This image is juxtaposed to today’s culture which is representative, respectful, and accommodating of the various cultures, faiths and world-views of the different communities. The meaning of Secular is obviously without religion and up to the 1950’s in American culture this was unheard of. Pluralism is a theory that states that our reality is composed of a multiplicity of ultimate beings or principles. This Secular Pluralism has been fighting its way to the forefront of our culture ever since the founding father’s placed the phrase E pluribus Unum as a motto found on the Great Seal of the United States. They also placed the words on the one dollar bill and on all U. S. coins. It must be an important American concept?

The meaning for this Latin phrase is Out of Many, One. Originally it was thought to represent out of many colonies emerged one great nation. However, in our contemporary times that out of many has come to mean: peoples, races, and ancestries which have consequently emerged a single people and a great nation, typically referred to as the melting pot. With the emergence of the Many in America we have a white washed culture that no longer has a Christian water fountain from which all the town’s people drink. Instead, today there are Many fountains and Many competing god’s in American culture.

In truth one could say that the concept of Secular Pluralism was even Biblical and had deep Biblical roots associated with one of the most dramatic stories in Biblical literature -- Yahweh vs. Baal on Mt. Carmel. After a drought of three years, Elijah presented himself to Ahab, the king of Israel, with the promise that Yahweh would provide rain. Elijah then challenged 450 prophets of Asherah to a contest on Mt. Carmel. “Elijah came to all the people, and said, ‘How long will you falter between two opinions? If the Lord is
God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.’ But the people answered him not a word.’”  

Elijah’s prayers are profound because “he was sorely wounded by his countrymen’s indecisive attitude toward the issue between Yahweh and Baal.”  

King Ahab could not understand “why he could not combine the worship of the God of Israel with the cult of Baal…prophets had to fight hard against this great sky god Baal…[who] controlled the weather and therefore gave or withheld fertility.” 

Ahab had broken the covenant relationship with God. Elijah’s and Ahab’s contest was moved to a higher level, because Ahab follows Baal. Each side made sacrifices to their God without building a fire. The lighting of the fire was to be performed by the strongest god, and would thus reveal Yahweh as the true God. In the competition the god Baal was silent. Elijah mocked the prophets of Baal and said, “Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is meditating, or he is busy, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened.” 

The 450 prophets poured forth excuses that Baal is a busy god or a sleeping god, Elijah made giving of the rains the clear central idea in the competition of Secular Plurality.

Monotheism is at stake in this Biblical paradigm, which today in our Secular Pluralist culture is only one of Many choices for worship. The people of Israel could not worship another god if they worshiped the God of Israel. The Gospel of Matthew 12:25 summed it up eloquently “Every Kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand.”

In June of 1858 at the acceptance speech of Abraham Lincoln to the U.S. Senate from the state of Illinois Lincoln spoke of the issue of slavery and said “In my opinion, it will not cease until a crises shall have been reached and passed. ‘A house divided against itself cannot stand.’ I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free….but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other.” Today our American Secular Pluralist culture has Many gods and or belief systems that compete for our devotion.

The Old Testament scholar Richard Nelson believed that “Israel is gathered to witness the contest for it is their exclusive loyalty to Yahweh that is at stake.” Elijah poured a large amount of water over his sacrifice and asked Yahweh to reveal Himself by consuming the sacrifice. “Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood and the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water that was in the trench.”  

When the people saw the clear victory of Yahweh, they fell on their faces and said, “The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is God!” The result of this defining moment in the competition was now up to the people who “fell and confessed that Yahweh is God.” The fire of God is supernatural and it was likely lightening that struck. Lightening sent “as a specific display of divine grace.” 

Elijah’s prayer makes clear to the people that they must know that Yahweh is God! God will turn the people back to fidelity. “Elijah’s prayer proposal to Yahweh receives an answer which proves Yahweh is God.” Which God could really affect human existence? If Baal, they would have to practice the magic to survive. Then they could live
the materialistic, self-centered life that comes from serving gods of our own making. If it were Yahweh, then they would have to live by the high ethical and moral standards of the Law of Moses derived from the Torah. The story tells of the worthlessness of all other gods all other gods were lumped together and dismissed. God then sent the rain He had promised and the drought ended.

The origins of Secular Pluralism and competing gods in our American culture have deep seeded roots all the way back to before America was founded. Nationalism was born of the European people and this ideology gave way to all religious forces due to the Roman Catholic corruption and disillusionment of a central belief in the Papal rule. “The nation-state has taken the place of God. Responsibilities for education, healing and public welfare which had formerly rested with the Church devolved more and more upon the nation-state.” 13

Things that previously only God could provide were now provided by the nation-state and this state was equated with happiness, a replacement for God. The Reformation gave individual Christians the ability to understand their own religion and interpret it in the light of reason. In post-Enlightenment Europe the Holy Church and the Holy Empire were removed by the omnipotent state which replaced God. The welfare system is a classic example of the nation-state becoming the God, freedom from fear, hunger, disease and want were characteristics associated with the nation-state.

Secular Pluralism covertly traveled the high seas to America in search of a fertile ground to plant itself in due time. Subsequently, the Enlightenment that took place in America and the citizens of America, like their counterparts in Europe, used reason to understand their faith and the multiplicities of faith in America. The ‘Great Awakening’ began the process of undercutting the established churches, particularly the Puritans and the Church of England known as the Anglicans or Episcopalians.

The next step on the road to Secular Pluralism in America was the American Revolution which required states to allow religious diversity in order to win independence from Great Britain. Once freedom was gained America was open to mass migrations with each wave of immigrants bringing with them their individual religious belief systems. The religious complexity in American culture became the driving force behind the American motto, E Pluribus Unum, and America’s Secular Pluralistic melting pot continued to be mixed with many different religions and belief systems.

Harvard University President Drew Gilpin Faust in her newest book This Republic Of Suffering wrote “The Civil War matters to us today because…It established a newly centralized nation-state and launched it on a trajectory of economic expansion and world influence.” 14 The nation-state became the god in American culture and it diffused Christianity as the central religious belief system.

The new questions theologically which came after the Civil War had to now be inclusive of an American culture in which President Dwight D. Eisenhower believed “that it doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you believe in something.” 15 In the 1950’s of
America, covertly, Secular Pluralism had found deep cultural roots and now “a church that had ceased to ask the right questions as it went about congratulating itself for transforming the world, not noticing, that in fact the world had tamed the church.” 16

The church began to identify itself with secular radicals who presented a new secular solution in the twentieth century: Marxism, Feminism, and the Sexual Revolution. These and other movements became the competing god’s of American culture which the church identified. The church of the 1960’s would need to be challenged in terms of the basic radical assertions of the gospel and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. On the heals of a Secular Pluralistic culture, where any belief was a good belief, the church had to lead the way back to the basic cross of Christ as its old/new motto in order to fight against the Secular Pluralistic American Culture. It took a great thinker like Reinhold Niebuhr to teach the public church the political democratic process that could influence government and culture for the sake of the cross of Christ.

Aristotle taught “that the moral life is life lived on the basis of example.” 17 In American culture, Christians should not be looking for secular icons to model themselves after, for we clearly have our example in the perfect life of our Lord and Savior Jesus of Nazareth. Consequently, the starting point in the church was “having a community capable of sustaining Christian virtue…The church enables us to be better people than we could have been if left to our own devices.” 18 Without the church the world does not know its own identity. We would not know enough to be moral without the church. We need the church to combat the competitive gods of our Secular Pluralistic American culture.

Jesus Christ is the supreme act of divine intrusion into the world’s settled arrangements. Christian ethics are church-dependent. Christian ethics only make sense “from the point of view of what we believe has happened in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.” 19 William Willimon, the former Dean of Duke University’s Divinity School, defined ethics by saying it “is simply the task of assembling reminders that enable us to remember how to speak and to live the language of the gospel.” 20 Christian ethics first help us to see the world in a new light. Then Christians are challenged to live in a new fashion, which is according to Christ and his teachings of the Sermon on the Mount.

Christian faith in Jesus must be about reflecting faithful behavior, which is learned through the church, which guides us through a Secular Pluralistic culture. 21 The Sermon on the Mount in it entirety is key to understanding the Christian ethic. The great conservative theologian William Barclay believed the Sermon on the Mount was “the grave and solemn utterance of the central things; it is the opening of Jesus’ heart and mind to the men who were to be his right-hand men in his task.” 22 He went on to say it was “The Ordination Address to the Twelve” and the essence of the teaching of Jesus to the inner circle of his chosen men, a virtual complete summary of his consistent teachings to his disciples. 23

The Sermon on the Mount was a definitive interpretation of the Torah delivered to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Jesus does not do an end around the teachings of the Torah, but he ‘fulfills’ it by providing its proper interpretation. Jesus is teaching a moral life of Christian
community which has a whole new teaching tradition found in the first nine Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount, which I read this morning. Not only did the Beatitudes cut across the ethic of that time and our time; they cut across the sacred law of Moses.’ The Beatitudes are a total attitude of mind and a particular kind of character which is competitive with the gods of our Secular Pluralistic culture and is ultimately counter-cultural. It not only tells Christians how to live, but emphasizes the importance of Jesus and his teachings.24

Through the Beatitudes Jesus addressed what life in the Kingdom will be like. It is the essence of all that Jesus continuously and habitually taught his disciples.25 The question then emerges from Jesus teaching the Beatitudes--how is it possible “for human beings who are vulnerable, finite, and mortal to be nonviolent, utterly faithful, and perfect even as God is perfect? What sort of gargantuan ethical heroism would be required to foster such an ethic?”26 William Willimon asked the question “What sort of community would be required to support an ethic of nonviolence, marital fidelity, forgiveness, and hope such as the one sketched by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount?”27

It is through our theology and our baptism that we believe in the story of Christ. Our ethic emerges and this is what enforces the Beatitudes to make sense in our faith journey. In the Sermon on the Mount, the boundaries between church and world are brought into clear view. Jesus was not crucified for saying or doing what made sense to everyone. He was counter-cultural in every aspect of his life and ministry. Like Elijah, Jesus confronted the other competitive gods of the Secular Pluralistic culture of his time. Consequently, this makes his teachings irrational to the secular mindset. Jesus setting a child in the midst of the disciples was a counter-cultural extremist act that boggled the minds of his disciples and his followers.

The Beatitudes are not a strategy for achieving a better society; instead they are a vision of the in-breaking of a new society. They are promises, instances, and imaginative examples of life in the Kingdom of God here on this earth.28 William Willimon stated “the basis for the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount is not what works but rather the way God is.”29 He went on to say “God has taken matters in hand [and has issued] an invitation to all people to become citizens of a new Kingdom, a messianic community.”30 The faithful of First Presbyterian Church are challenged to live out a practical form of Christian ethics that is taught and lived out through the life and ministry of the Jesus Christ and his church. It is vital, in this competitive culture of Many gods, in this Secular Pluralistic environment that the church plays a central role if it is to be the church of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion:
The contest between God and Baal was an event that changed the course of Israel’s religious history. Its meaning is clear, the people must choose between the competing gods of culture. They can choose to limp along undecided, and by default choose Baal, the magical god and his 450 prophets. However, Elijah would have the faithful know “He is no God; he is a joke.”31 The willingness to choose is a move toward faith because it
shows an openness to allow God to work in one's life to have Jesus of Nazareth be the primary example of the ethic one chooses to live by.

If people are really open to God's work in the world, if they are willing to base their decision for God on God alone, then they will most often choose God. The church has no greater task than to move people toward a willingness to choose. Then it is up to the Grace of God. No God is real if he does not matter in Christian's lives. If Christians are on the side of Baal they are on the side of a Secular Pluralistic culture with many god's like that of consumerism, materialism and many other 'ism' which exist in our culture.

Today, Christians focus on the nation-state, their jobs, security, home, social life and self-sufficiency, and they may not worship Baal, but they don't worship the God of the Bible either. This story is not about Elijah or miracles. It is about God and it's about us. God will always do whatever is necessary to reveal himself to human beings. He will always make the first move toward humanity. We must choose in response. It may be a great supernatural event like fire from heaven, or it may be a whisper from a whirlwind that God uses to speak to Christians. Yet, God will always act to show Himself as God. If we are honest, if we have come to the place where we are willing to choose, who else could we choose but God? What other example do we need than the Christian ethic shown by the example of Jesus of Nazareth?

As Christians, we are challenged this morning to choose the God of Elijah's world and leave the competitive gods alone which are rampant and found everywhere in our Secular Pluralistic American culture. We are also challenged this morning by the ethical example of Jesus of Nazareth and his counter-cultural nature which invites us to take a first step “to peace by letting go of ourselves, our things, our world. The cross, stands for us as the sign of one man's ultimate dispossession of this world in order to inaugurate a new world.” 32 Amen
Endnotes:

Bibliography: