

Syncretism and the Christian Faith

Introduction

One of the things that I find to be very odd, is when a representative of the church speaks out on an issue without considering all of the issues.

For example, in regard to a refugee crisis, some leaders are quite vocal in terms of the need for Australia to open its borders. But what they conveniently forget is the danger that then imposes on the beliefs of the Christian faithful.

Of course, in one sense, we live in a secular society, and therefore God's laws are not seen as relevant by the majority. Nevertheless, if a church leader chooses to speak out on a particular issue, they should represent all of God's values, not just some of them. And they certainly shouldn't just be upholding the values that are prevalent in our society.

And the reason for that, is that it doesn't take much for outside influences to be a real problem to the Christian faith. And syncretism—the amalgamation of different religions—is a trap that needs desperately to be avoided.

The Old Testament Model

And that is why, in the story of God's covenant people in the Old Testament, a very different view of people of other faiths is advocated. And it describes the lengths that a compassionate God was prepared to go, to protect his people from outside influences. And that included a theology of separateness and distinctiveness, which is usually lost in the more modern refugee debates, even among Christians.

Indeed, in the early pages of the Bible, there are many stories and illustrations of the dangers of syncretism. But they also tell us that Israelites didn't listen, that some were tempted to adopt other gods, and that others became engaged in the practices of the Canaanites. As a consequence, some abandoned their faith in God for the pursuit of the worship of idols; and some incorporated the beliefs and practices of others, while maintaining a lesser sort of faith in the living God.

The consequences of syncretism were clear. It was a disaster for the people, and it was a disaster for God. And it was a disaster that God had shown the people how to avoid.

Syncretism

Having said that, syncretism, in many ways, is a very understandable practice, particularly when there are aspects of other beliefs and practices which can seem attractive. But that is why the Israelites were warned against it. Indeed, as they prepared to enter the Promised Land, God was quite specific—his people were not to adopt the gods of the people of Canaan, and they were not to engage in their religious practices, even in their worship of him.

Now you don't have to be a genius to understand God's warning. Adopting other gods is tantamount to replacing him as the creator. Furthermore, adopting their practices has the effect of diminishing God too.

As a consequence, we need to be very careful when it comes to encouraging or adopting any non-Christian beliefs and practices at all. And the sources of influence can be pretty mixed and varied.

Outside Influences

a). Our Changing Christian Beliefs

After all, even our own culture—which some have claimed to be based on the Christian faith—there has been a move away from orthodox biblical teaching. Indeed, the idea that we are sinners, that God is beyond our ability to comprehend, and that the church was given by God for our well-being, have all grown to be increasingly unpopular. Instead, the idea that God is a loving god, that it doesn't matter what we do, and that the church is an optional extra, is now widespread.

And, indeed, in the nineteenth century a number of so-called Christian religions rose up as a consequence of this rejection of sin, and with the idea of making God understandable (e.g. Mormons (1820), Christian Science (1866), Jehovah's Witnesses (1879), etc. etc.). Furthermore, nominalism has become a real problem in Australia. Indeed, in Australia, even though more than 50% of the population call themselves Christians, less than 5% actually go to church.

By-and-large, then, people are no longer comfortable with the idea of being sinners, they don't want to believe in a God who is beyond their comprehension, and the church has largely become irrelevant. People may know that they are not perfect, but the majority do not consider sin in terms of alienation from God at all. And in doing so, they have effectively reduced God to being equal with (or less than) themselves. And, as a consequence, the adoption of cultural values by the church simply serves to further water the Christian message down.

b). Islam and Other World Religions

Furthermore, in our society, there is this thing called political correctness. And there seems to be a gag on the issue of Muslims living in Australia, etc. etc. Indeed, it is considered politically incorrect to suggest the need for any sort of debate about immigration.

And at the heart of it, is the problem of being a 'civilised' country—an issue that includes the idea that we should accept anyone and everyone no matter what their beliefs. And yet, with the almost daily reporting of problems in the Middle East, and the extension of terrorism to other parts of the world (including Australia), it is an issue that is not going to go away.

Now, of course, there is a big difference between who people say they are—in terms of belief—and those who actually practice the faith (as I've just illustrated). And that is true of Muslims and Christians alike. And history teaches us that many wars have been fought in the name of God, but where—on analysis—there has been little evidence of actual faith.

As a consequence, without a debate, and without the different sides being able to tell their stories and share their fears, the division is not likely to improve.

And yet, there is still the issue of the need of the church to keep the Christian faith pure—uncontaminated from other beliefs. Because it is not without reason that the Israelites were told not to cohabit with people of other beliefs and practices in the Promised Land.

And while this aspect of the Old Testament is often considered to be unpopular, God's concern for the need to protect his people from false beliefs and straying to other so-called 'gods' still has great merit. And what is at stake, is people's eternal well-being. And as a jealous god, God wants his people to live with him in eternity. And that just isn't possible if his people reject him and pursue other beliefs.

And, indeed, the matter is so serious that Jesus, himself, repeated the idea that he was the only way to God, and that all other paths lead to eternal destruction.

There was a reason why God did not want Judaism to be mixed with other religions. And as a consequence, from the church's perspective, the issue of having people of other faiths in Australia is a problem. As a consequence, the immigration of people of other faiths is a situation that the church should not be encouraging.

Christianity (like most religions, including Islam) is an exclusive religion—it cannot countenance other beliefs—and it should not be providing legitimacy to any other beliefs either.

c). The Practices of Other Religions

And it's not just other beliefs that are problem, the practices of other religions are a problem too.

So, for example, the mental, physical, and spiritual practices of yoga and the martial arts, which have now become well engrained in our society, are still all tied up in other religions. And indeed, many Christians practice them. Astrology, séances, etc., are also practiced by members of our congregations. And yet they are denounced in the pages of the Old Testament. And even Halloween, which has become popularised today, includes some very questionable pagan roots.

Of course, the issue of whether Christians should practice yoga and the martial arts has been a hot topic over many years. But the reason there has been so much debate, is that although many of the modern practices are adaptations of older religious practices—and in a sense have been sanitised—most, if not all, still incorporate aspects of their past religious base. Indeed, the idea of some sort of creative life force, harmonising the body with the life forces of the universe, is still a common idea in these practices.

And even though some may claim, 'I only do the exercises', Christians are still supposed to believe in a creator—YHWH (Genesis 1:1); we are supposed to believe that it is he who is the creator, sustainer, and redeemer of the universe. Christians are not supposed to worship other gods, or copy the practices associated with the worship of other gods (Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 12:29-31). And Christians are not supposed to be stumbling blocks to others, no matter how liberated they may feel (1 Corinthians 8:9).

So the syncretism of Christianity with other beliefs—through practices associated with other religions—is a common problem in our churches. And it is usually accompanied with a statement that a particular practice has been separated from its spiritual roots. But the fact is that some are attracted to the practices because of their spiritual teachings, and they then go on and pursue the teachings behind the practices. And that would suggest that they have not been totally separated from their spiritual roots at all.

Indeed, they are examples of what was in the back of God's mind when he told the Israelites not to pursue practices associated with other religions. Because as far as God was concerned, some things might seem harmless enough—even appropriate as part of their worship of him—but things can and do quickly develop from there. Things don't stay the same. And a practice—even in its sanitised form which may seem to be harmless—can so easily develop into something far more sinister and dangerous.

Complicating this further, yoga and the martial arts tend to be called by their one or two-word name, whether they are 'just exercises' or are overtly 'religious'. So the name makes no distinction between the two. Which again, suggests God's wisdom in prohibiting the pursuit of other religions and their practices.

d). Ancestral Beliefs

And if all that were not enough, syncretism is a problem when it comes to the conjoining of Christianity with ancestral beliefs. Indeed, it is a problem that the church has had to face for many centuries.

Wherever Christianity has spread, people have not necessarily disposed of their animistic and ancestral beliefs. Indeed, they have often blended them with their new found faith. And even in the western world, the Christian faith has been mixed with all sorts of ancestral and animistic beliefs and practices—some of which are obvious and others which are far more subtle.

Summary

So, sadly, syncretism is alive and well and very much part of our churches today. Indeed, many of the practices I've mentioned have gained deep roots in the life of members. Church people practice yoga, they read their stars, and churches hire out their halls for all sorts of incompatible practices. So much so, that in order to de-syncretise the faith, there will need to be a major cultural shift in the church today.

But hopefully that shift will be based on a review of biblical principles, an honest appraisal of current practices and beliefs, and a genuine commitment to restoring Christian beliefs and practices to those prescribed by God.

But the situation isn't helped by Christians speaking out on topics, without considering the wider ramifications. Because, in doing so, they further water down the Christian faith. Because that is the consequence of advocating an increase in the presence of other beliefs and practices.

The Call for Intolerance

Now, having said all of that, in Western countries the call for tolerance and understanding has become very vocal in recent years. And it has been realised, in part, through challenging people's thinking, and through legislation. As a consequence, as a society, we are constantly being encouraged to move away from prejudices based on ethnic, sexual, religious, and political views, to embrace a more 'inclusive', 'caring', and 'enlightened' attitude.

And from a secular point of view all that can sound very 'reasonable.' Indeed, many 'sound' and 'persuasive' arguments have been put forward. Unfortunately, many of the arguments clash head-on with the very basics of religious belief. And not just the beliefs of Christianity, but those of Judaism, Islam, etc. too. Because, as most religions are exclusive, they cannot be tolerant to other beliefs.

Christianity teaches there is only one way to God; there is only one way for salvation. And at the very core of Christian belief, is the teaching that Jesus is the only way to God, and that no one can get to God except through him (John 14:6). At the very basic level of Christian belief, then, is the understanding that there is only one genuine religion, and that all other religions are false—they simply lead people away from God. As Christians, then, we are called to neither accept them nor embrace them. And that is despite whatever is legislated or society teaches.

As a consequence, when it comes to other religions and their associated practices, the church should be expressing intolerance not tolerance. Because it should be trying to protect God's name, and keeping the faith uncorrupted by nominalism, other faiths and their practices, and ancestral beliefs and animism.

Living in a Secular Country

There is, therefore, a great gulf between Christianity and the hopes and expectations of a secular world. And if we lived in a truly Christian country things would be much simpler. But then the laws of today would reflect Christian values too.

But we don't live in such an environment. And even in Australia, nothing could be further from the truth. Because even the values that were once held in high esteem, have, over the years, been twisted, whittled away, and largely forgotten.

Of course, this then leads to the question, 'How can a Christian live in a secular society?' To which the answer must be, 'With difficulty.' Because a Christian must live under two sets of rules: the rules of the society and the rules of God. And the rules of God must always take priority.

At the heart of the issue then, is the problem of the exclusive nature of religion. It is the priority of God over other religions, and it is the priority of God over the secular. And for Christians the priority should be applying God's laws and principles for building a healthy relationship with him, and for building up a healthy community.

Trying to teach people, and passing legislation, may make things ‘legal’ in a secular sense, but it should not necessarily change things in the eyes of a believer. So no matter what society teaches, or what legislation is passed, there will invariably be aspects that will not be acceptable to a Christian. And simply pretending that tolerance is possible in all circumstances, is simply to ignore the obvious.

But in regard to Christianity, it’s not necessarily that Christians don’t care. They do. It’s just that their prior focus has to be on people having a healthy relationship with their creator, and for the building up of healthy God-centred communities. And that requires them to apply God’s principles, when society’s laws and attitudes conflict.

Conclusion

Living in a secular country, then, is a big problem for any Christian. The values society holds are very different to those of the Christian faith. ‘Civilised’ nations may welcome all, but the role of a Christian is to keep the faith pure and to uphold their God given beliefs.

As a consequence, having other religions existing side-by-side with the church is a real problem, and not one that should be encouraged.

How, then, does the church care for refugees and others overseas in need? How does it show that it cares, while remaining true to the faith? Well that is the real challenge for the church today. Because it needs to find and encourage alternatives to the current practice of integrating people of other faiths. And to do that, it needs to find its voice—which has been lost for so long—in the halls of our secular governments.

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