

The World and the Christian Faith

A. Physical and Spiritual Safety

Introduction

One of the most common stories in our news bulletins and newspapers over the last few years has been the mass migration of people searching for a new home. Indeed there's been a lot of press about the plight of refugees, and the lengths that some will go to, to find a safe haven.

Of course not all the publicity is good—most of it is bad. And it isn't helped by people who are seen to be 'queue jumpers' by economic migrants pretending to be refugees, and by people keen to make money from the misfortune of others.

Indeed, whichever way you read the news, the world is in a sorry state. And the cause . . . Well there are so many reasons. But at the heart of the matter is usually greed for wealth and power, or intolerance for the unlike—whether in terms of religious beliefs, ethnic background, colour, sex, or whatever.

Now some might suggest that the simple solution is for matters to be resolved in the country of origin. Or, failing that, for other countries to welcome people with open arms. But are either of these solutions realistic? And is the provision of an environment where people can be physically safe all that is required?

The Extent of the Problem

After all, there is far more to life than just being physically safe. True sanctuary needs to include other kinds of security too.

Which is why the problem for those with hard held religious beliefs may be, that there is no such thing as a safe haven. Because even western countries, which may appear to meet the physical safety criteria, they cannot necessarily provide the spiritual security that people of faith require.

Indeed, using the Christian faith as an example, Christians would have to be one of the most persecuted groups in the world. And if we were to take a map of the world, and colour in the countries where Christians are persecuted, we would probably include all countries where the predominant religion is Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism. We would also colour in many other countries where other religions are dominant. As a consequence, our map would show huge blocks where Christians are persecuted and not welcome.

But then we shouldn't stop there. Because we would then need to colour in all the countries which at one time or another have claimed to be 'Christian' but where Christian principles have been eroded away—and that would include Australia. Indeed, there would be no countries left at all.

Even in the west, a Christian refugee might find an immediate safe haven from the physical abuse they are fleeing, but the constant shift of western societies away from Christian principles means that their religious beliefs will be constantly and increasingly under attack.

Indeed, the recent pressure on Western governments to review the definition of marriage, not only undermined the family unit, but was an attack on the traditional beliefs of practicing Christians, Muslims, and Jews alike. Furthermore, the emphasis on the nuclear family over the extended family, the emphasis on the rights of the mother over the rights of the unborn baby (through abortion, remedies for infertility, or medical reasons), and even the emphasis on a welfare society over the responsibilities of the extended family, all serve to attack the family unit upon which all three religions have their base.

As a consequence, the west may offer physical sanctuary in the short term, but it cannot solve the longer-term issue of providing sanctuary from the more important aspect of spiritual attack. Indeed, far from solving the problem, accepting religious refugees within the context of a secular society may actually make their situation worse not better.

Living in a Secular Country

As a consequence, one of the problems that Christians face in Western countries is the accommodation of secular ideas.

a). Undermining the Christian Faith

Indeed, the concept of ‘positive discrimination’ to help those less fortunate, is one such idea. It is an idea which on the surface can be seen to be positive. However, emphasising one group for special treatment is always at the detriment of another. And in order to accommodate the beliefs and practices of others, the beliefs and practices of Christians are often considered to be fair game.

But then persecution does not necessarily have to be overt to be real. But it is where the current focus lies. Because in order to solve the immediate problem, what is often forgotten or ignored are the more subtle things that eat away at people’s beliefs. And that may create a situation, in the longer term, far more damaging, and have greater impact, than the current problem of the mass exodus from places like Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Western society may try to embrace other beliefs and cultures. Indeed, it may even advocate ‘freedom of religion’ but it doesn’t seem to understand the problems that living in a secular society really brings.

b). Tolerance and the Clash of Cultures

Furthermore, it’s not news that we live in troubled times. Nor is it news that our headlines are constantly bombarded with reports of ‘hate’ crimes and ‘terrorism’. Indeed, our news is full of terrorist acts—either in their planning or in the events themselves. It is also full of ‘hate’ stories involving ethnic differences, religious intolerance, and sexual orientation.

But what seems extraordinary to me, is that when a story is reported, it invariably includes a lot of head shaking and denial. Indeed, people are constantly seen to be scratching their heads pretending to understand why.

Now don’t get me wrong, I don’t wish to uphold what is happening in our world in any way. But if there are to be solutions, then we need to identify what the problems are. And simply shaking our heads, pretending not to understand, is not going to help solve the issues at all.

And indeed, for the most part, the answer is very clear. It is to do with greed, envy, hatred, and the exploitation of the people.

From a Christian point of view, it's an indication that we are all sinners. That we are out of touch with God and with the principles he provided for living. Indeed, despite calls for 'tolerance' and 'understanding', they are dilemmas for which there can be no man-made resolution.

And yet in the west we live in a godless and individualistic society—a society based around 'what's in it for me' and 'I can do what I like'. And this contrasts considerably with the biblical values which revolve around what is needed for a community to be healthy and thriving.

As a consequence, there is a clash of cultures, between people of faith and those who have little time for God. And the Christian church is not alone in this dilemma.

But it's not that Christians don't care. Indeed they do. But given the choice between following God's way and following man's way, there is no room for compromise. Because tolerance—accepting other people's values—is one thing that God warned his people to avoid. And why? Because it is harmful to the believer's relationship with their Creator.

Calls for 'tolerance' from the secular world, then, can be seen as an attack on religious values. And pride marches, and 'in your face' attitudes and responses do not help either. Indeed, all they do is to aggravate the existing divisions further.

With diametrically opposed beliefs, there can be no win-win scenario. Furthermore, pointing the finger of blame at a single perpetrator often misses the point. Extremists may wish to exploit differences for their own purposes, but so-called 'hate' crimes and 'terrorism' are often a symptom of a much bigger problem. And shaking one's head in ignorance or denial does nothing to help the situation at all.

c). Bad Mousing God

Bad language is another feature of modern life. Indeed, in busy city streets there would be hardly an occasion when swear words or profanities are not heard. On television, the use of cursing and vulgar language, particularly in comedies and films, is also quite common place. Furthermore, the use of such language is often used as a deliberate ploy, in order to engage the intended audience.

And yet one of the features of bad language is the constant misuse of words that describe the things that should be held sacred. And most commonly these relate to either our creator or to our intimate relationships. As a consequence offensive language often relates to God or sex. Hence the terms God, Jesus, Lord, and Christ, are just some of the terms that are often misused.

Complicating the issue further, however, is that over the centuries language has changed. And a term that was coined several centuries ago may have lost its original meaning. Hence the terms: Jeez (Jesus), Lordy (Lord), Gee (Jesus), Gawd Blimey (God blind me), Goddam (God damn), Good grief (Good God), and Crikey (Christ).

Now, of course, on that basis one could easily ask, 'Are only the first group of misused words offensive? And are the ones that have apparently lost their meaning, now OK? Or Are both groups equally as bad?'

Well it seems to me that the lost or forgotten profanities denigrate God, just as much as the more blatant ones. They all abuse the name of God, and they are all used in such negative contexts. As a consequence, the answer must be that none of them are right. On the contrary we should respect and uphold God's name.

Which is why I believe that the appropriate action to offending TV programmes, is to switch them off. And if enough people did that—indeed if all Christians did that—then I'm sure that those responsible would quickly get the message.

Having said that, however, I am amazed at the frequency of use of the more obscure and forgotten profanities, even by those who are offended by the more blatant bad language. Indeed, they are used so often, that hardly anybody blinks an eye.

d). What Am I Singing About?

But then have you ever walked around the house, singing away, and suddenly realised what it was that you were singing? I have. Because every now and again the words of a song can come to life, and it's like I never knew what they were before.

Of course, the problem with me, is that I've never really been interested in the words, only the overall sound of the music. As a consequence, I've always preferred to immerse myself in the multiple layers of my favourite music, without too much concern for the meaning of the lyrics.

Nevertheless, the reality is that writers of music, often have something in mind when they write their songs, etc. And sometimes that meaning is explicit and other times it's not. Therefore, it can take time for the true meaning to filter through.

But singing your favourite songs, or even singing along to a catchy tune, can be a bit of a worry. Particularly when you pull yourself up and wonder about the meaning of it all.

Singing songs, then—secular or religious—can be a very precarious thing to do. And it certainly raises the need to be aware of, 'What exactly are we listening to?' when we watch the television, listen to the radio, or put on some music.

Having said that, we also need to keep an eye on the music that we sing in church. Otherwise someday we will catch ourselves singing a favourite hymn or chorus, in church or at home, and ask ourselves, 'What it is that we've been singing?' too.

e). Advertising Our Gods

Now some people might consider me a little bit odd. And they might be right. For I tend to think differently to many people. Indeed, I often have ideas and concepts floating around my head, which others might consider a little strange. But one of the things that concerns me is the idea of people being walking advertisements.

After all, how many people these days walk around with clothing which has brand names or business logos on the outside, for everyone to see? How many people wear sportswear—even one's team's colours—with all the advertising and logos that are on them? And what-is-more, how many people wear them, even in the most inappropriate of situations?

Is it any wonder, then, that I have this image of people being walking advertisements?

But being walking advertisements is only part of the modern phenomenon. Our houses are living advertisements too. Indeed, everything electrical (TV's, fridges, washing machines, computers, etc.) proudly displays its name in our homes. But then so do the cars that we drive.

And, on top of all of that, there are people who are so fanatical about a particular brand or logo (in terms of, cars, computers, mobile phones, etc.), that they wouldn't consider buying any other brand.

Now it seems strange to me that people would want to walk around advertising products and businesses to the world. Because by doing so, they effectively display the things that they love on their sleeves.

And that's sad really, because in the great scheme of things, it's not companies or logos that we are supposed to display. They are simply man-made objects which are supposed to make life easier. No, it's not businesses we are supposed to display or be proud of, it's God we are supposed to advertise. And yet our society doesn't seem to work that way at all.

Indeed, by displaying the companies and logos on our person and in our homes, we effectively make them into our gods. They become the things which are important to us. And yet they are not gods, and they are not supposed to be important to us at all.

God is our God. He is the one who created us all. So if there was anyone we should promote then it's him. And yet, I wonder how many of us today would be prepared to replace the companies and logos on our hearts with wearing God on our sleeves?

f). Being Politically Correct

Furthermore, one of the features of modern life is the apparent need to be politically correct. Of course, it probably started with good reason—with the idea of not wishing to offend or disadvantage certain groups—but I wonder whether it has all gone a bit too far. After all, we seem to have got to the point where people so pussy foot around each other, they are frightened of saying anything.

Which is a problem. Because how can we deal with the issues that are hidden under the umbrella of being politically correct, if we cannot bring them out into the open?

Which is why, to a large extent, I think the whole thing has become a nonsense. And there are so many issues that are currently off the radar. Not least of which, in Australia, are:

Religious Beliefs. But then most religions claim to be the only way for salvation—including Christianity. As a consequence, it is not possible for true believers in one religion to be totally comfortable living side-by-side with believers of another faith.

Ethnic Background. But then there are inequalities in the way people are treated based on race. Indeed, indigenous people in Australia receive some welfare benefits over and above those of non-indigenous people in similar situations. And in the case of some welfare programmes, benefits are payable to those who identify themselves as indigenous regardless of their financial status.

The Disabled. But then there is a need to recognise that there are inequalities in the way disabled people are treated. Indeed, the blind receive advantages over and above those who are deaf or otherwise disabled.

Sexual Orientation. But then there is a need to recognise that society remains divided on the issue of same-sex relationships. Which suggests that legislation or not, it is going to be some time before there will be full acceptance (if ever) of same-sex relationships in the community.

Now many of the issues in Australia fall under the banner of 'positive discrimination'. And yet positive discrimination is a contradiction in terms. If one favours one group, it is always to the detriment of others. Discrimination is still discrimination. It's just a 'nice' way of saying it, to those who are favoured.

Being politically correct, then, may have started as a means to prevent offending or disadvantaging certain groups, but all its practice does is to suppress the issues that need to be addressed.

Now, of course, we should care for people, and we should treat all people with dignity. But we shouldn't pretend that concealing the issues under the banner of being 'politically correct' really helps anyone. Because it doesn't. All it does is hide or exaggerate the many problems that can only be resolved if they are out in the open.

Conclusion

When it comes to the problem of safety, then, the West can no more provide safety for the Christian than any other society and nation. And those who are Christians in Australia face attack from many sources—some deliberate and some accidental.

Indeed, Christian beliefs are being constantly undermined, believers continue to face an increasing clash of cultures, their God is constantly being trivialised or foul mouthed, they are encouraged to be walking advertisements for businesses of no consequence, and they face the negative side of the idea of being 'politically correct'.

Is it any wonder, then, that when a Christian refugee comes to Australia, and accepts a greater physical security than they might otherwise have had at home, in a sense they are no more secure than they were when they were forced to leave home.

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The conclusion, *The World and the Christian Faith*.
Part B. Living in an Unbelieving World next month

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