

Multiculturalism in Religious Life Today

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In two previous Review for Religious articles, the effects of a religious congregation being international were discussed from the personal and the structural base.¹ In those articles internationality referred specifically to groups whose members came from or lived and worked in a variety of countries. Another reality, which may be of greater concern to American congregations whose membership and places of ministry are all in the United States, is the multicultural reality of the United States itself and the apparent interests of the "social minorities" in religious life today.

To date, most of the discussion seems to have been among vocation directors. Several years ago a special meeting was held to explore the possibility and the consequences of "widening our tents." Since then, vocation directors at their meetings — and often their interactions within their own communities — have raised the specter of denied or acknowledged prejudice.

The majority of religious in the United States come from white middle-class backgrounds. Many have worked with African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians in this country. Some congregations have worked with these groups for generations.

Yet until recently there seemed to be very little effort to foster religious vocations among these cultural groups. Indeed, at one point some congregations appeared to have discouraged such vocations actively.

There now appears to be a small but noticeable growth in the interest in what is being labeled the "social minorities." For the purpose of this article, the "social minorities" include older candidates, divorced persons, widows and widowers, the handicapped, and homosexuals.² The degree of openness or nonopenness varies with the different groups, but there is sufficient concern among vocation directors to assume that in all of these cases there is less-than-eager acceptance of such candidates among the members of their congregations. To deny that there has been, and still is, prejudice against some or all of the groups mentioned would be naive. In some cases the prejudice is very direct and outspoken — toward homosexuals, for example. In other cases — racial or cultural groups, those who have been married — the resistance may be more subtle, based on questions about whether *they* will *fit* into present-day congregations. Much of the material I have

seen over the past few years focuses primarily on conscious prejudice and the need to overcome it. Two things make me feel that this is not a productive way to address the real issues.

First, prejudice appears to be a rational way of dealing with something which is much deeper than the rational part of us. Second, it leads to two very unproductive realities: blaming people for being prejudiced (which leads to denial and further resistance) and engendering a more subtle form of racism (or any other "ism" which might be involved). It is much more difficult to deal with these subtle forms of prejudice that emerge. For example, we find vocation and formation people allowing forms of behavior or modes of relating that would not be acceptable in white middle-class candidates. What is being said, unintentionally, is that *these* candidates cannot be expected to live the same way we do. This is racism — subtle racism.

In this article I do not wish to argue whether or not prejudice functions within religious congregations. Insofar as prejudice is based on misinformation, fear, and insecurity, it is certainly present in some religious and, to a greater or lesser degree, in whole congregations. I am also not dealing with the gross and overt racism of such groups as the "skinheads," but rather with the unconscious prejudice that good people have without being aware of it. What I would like to address is what I perceive to be a deeper question, one which requires a deeper response. I no longer believe that courses or workshops or sensitivity sessions on the question of prejudice are what will be of most value to religious of today and tomorrow.

Prejudice: Not the Real Issue

Before leaving the question of prejudice I would like to treat it as a response based on misinformation, fear, and insecurity. Prejudice, which is an aversion response, is most often based on one of those three factors. Regardless of our race, our culture, our sexual orientation, we accept — and

promulgate — a great deal of misinformation about people who are different from us. We *all* — that is, all humans — do this. Some people think that blacks are more sensual, criminally prone; that Asians are very "spiritual" but are not good at practical things (this in spite of the obvious progress of Asian Americans) or are devious in business; that homosexuals are more likely to be promiscuous and to attack people sexually. A library full of research that disproves this misinformation has little effect on the strongly prejudiced. Fear based on misinformation and on the terrible reality of the increasing crime and violence in our country bleeds over into fear that is not crime related: fear of needing to change "our" way of living and being if we allow "them" into our congregations. Even if we can deal rationally with all of the above elements — can prove them wrong, misdirected, irrational — we will not make a dent in true prejudice. I am not convinced that prejudice is the predominant problem behind the vocational questions that arise about cultural and social minorities in religious congregations. I believe it is something much deeper psychologically and theologically. Unless we approach it through these focuses, I do not think we will come to a new understanding, and therefore a new way of living religious life.

Being 'At Home' as a Base for Transformation

Recently, in a course that I attended at the Jungian Institute in Zurich, some ideas were put forth which, while not dealing directly with the concern of this article, opened for me a different way of looking at several things, including the vocational question now being discussed.³

One of the very rich aspects of Jungian psychology is the concept of the collective. Often we concentrate on the idea of the collective *unconscious*, without giving serious enough attention to other elements within and connected to that concept. For Jung, the collective is extremely important. In spite of the fact that he spent much of his life doing individual therapy and

consistently maintained that the individual is important, he held that the collective is central and most essential. The individual can live, and grow, and become transformed only when in touch with the center, with the collective. To be in touch with our center means to be living at a deeper level, moving toward the self and toward God. In Jungian terminology, becoming "individuated" requires more than simply developing one's talents, skills, and inner life in relation to the center. The center, the collective, is reached through the doorway of our myths, which are the beliefs and stories that are at the heart of all reality.

In his lectures Dr. John Hill developed the idea of the relationship between the center and the individual being "at home." I would like to suggest that what is problematic in religious congregations today in terms of "widening our tents" has less to do with prejudice and more to do with how we have defined "home" and, therefore, how we have experienced being "at home."

The environmentalists have helped us to understand that our home is the whole earth and have shown us the earth as our living base and support. They have helped to focus the reality of the whole human race as one family. This is not how we have thought of home or family over the millennia that humans have occupied the earth. Going back into what we know of prehistory, we see the development of clans; then tribes, ethnic groups; and, very late in our history, nation states. What is sad about much of the development is that it is so often based on how we are different. Thus, our human history is a history of differences leading to competition and conflict over land, goods, and even religion.

To approach the question of being "at home" from a mythic base means to realize that at the deepest level we are much more alike than we are different. The myths of the world, and of all the ages, are much more the same than different. Every culture has its stories of the hero and heroine, the journey, trials, and transformation. It is

sobering to read the many creation myths which exist and to realize that many more have been lost because the peoples who told them are gone forever.

If the earth is our "home" and our myths tell the same stories, then we need to look at the reality that we are all seeking for home. We all suffer from homesickness. At the soul level, we know we have lost touch with home, and we seek it in many substitutes. We can continue to seek for home separately, finding it in our own culture, our own country, our own way of doing things. Or we can seek for it together, knowing that home is more than we see and know, more than we presently experience. We can begin to sense that the diversity that frightens or repulses us may hold the seeds of a new home that is richer, more beautiful, and more truly ours.

The World Becoming One

During the last few years we have seen steps taken that stride toward a world of unity, one world to replace the segmented, war-filled world that we know as "first world," "second world," "third world." We watched the Berlin Wall come down accompanied by a surge of hope. We observed the reunification of East and West Germany with a sense that things would never again be the same. We, however, have also experienced the resurgence of divisiveness based on racial, ethnic, linguistic, and religious antipathies some of which go back for centuries.

Part of the urge, the growing desire, to be one world in reality is based on the connections that we have been making, consciously and unconsciously, and on our growing sense that we are all people of the one earth and that the differences which we have flaunted are incidentals, not essentials. The movement for one world needs to be based on our connections as people of the one earth.

"At Home" and Religious Life

What does all this have to do with religious life? A great deal. We share a mystic base as

people of the earth, an earth which has been redeemed by Jesus Christ. We, too, seek for home. We, too, share the homesickness. Like others, we have sometimes settled for a home that is less than it could be. Like some clans and tribes and nation states, we too often have sold our heritage of oneness for separate bowls of porridge.

In religious life we have heard the call of Jesus who said that he came so "all may be one." Reading the new Testament with the concept of "at home" is revealing. What Jesus seemed to put forward constantly was an end to divisions, hatreds, and injustices because we are all children of the same Creator (no matter what name we give the deity). As religious, we say that this is what we are all about.

In times past, being "at home" for religious meant to maintain the culture or subculture of the congregation within the broader culture of the church. It was a bit like a clan in ancient times. The new person who entered learned the culture and eventually was able to make some contribution to it. Those who could not "fit" for any of many reasons left or were sent away. Now it is not enough to continue the subculture known as religious life if it is tied up with the racial, ethnic, and other categories of the past. That we are mainly white middle-class communities now does not say anything about what we can be. To be at home in a ghetto does not mean that the ghetto is the only home we can have.

What will move us beyond the limitations we have imposed on ourselves, consciously and unconsciously? We need once again to recall the message of Jesus upon which religious life is based and which has both personal and communal sides. As religious we are continuously called to conversion and to transformation. Conversion and transformation are not simply related to sin; they are related to truth. We are one people; we are moving together toward one reality. We share one vision of religious life that is couched in many different languages, customs,

modalities. But the vision is central, is the heart. The rest is accidental.

How Can We Be "At Home" Together?

There are two stages in rediscovering, as religious, where our home is and how to open it to the larger home where everyone is or should be at home. The first stage is to begin to be "at home" with ourselves. We need to be at home with our own culture, our own "class," our own gender, our own sexuality, our own gifts, and our own weaknesses. We have to see this as part of who we are. To be "at home" with oneself means knowing who I am at a deep level of my psyche, accepting what I find, and being at ease with it. There is a fairly good argument to be made that people who are most homophobic are those who are most uncomfortable with their own sexuality.

The second stage involves being open to the reality that our home is *more*. We have to know in the inner fibers of our being that the oneness Jesus calls us to is real, is possible, is for now (not just for heaven), and that we must transform ourselves if we want to bring it about. To accomplish this we need to move beyond the narrow limits of our own experience and reality. This certainly means moving beyond intolerance, but, even more, we are invited to move beyond tolerance. As we touch with the inner reality of our center, we come to know that difference is good, that diversity can be a step toward the fullness we yearn for. Instead of a khaki-colored cloak, we are invited to don a coat of many colors. We are invited to a deep conversion that leads to transformation. We are asked to take the call of Jesus seriously, to become one with Christ by becoming one with all those he loves.

Some Practical Hints

In many practical ways it will be difficult. We have found comfortable modes of living. Since renewal, we have eliminated from religious life many of the less humane customs, but we may also have removed some of the challenge to go beyond ourselves — beyond our likes and dislikes — strive to be one with Christ and, therefore, one with

those he loves. We need to work again on our ability to stretch ourselves. Many of the current difficulties in our local community living would be alleviated if our life as religious challenged us to go beyond ourselves.

At present, when someone new enters a good community, we know that some things will have to change. The members of the community share their norms and experiences with the newcomer and, in turn, listen to the newcomer's norms and experiences. If there is to be a life-giving continuation, then all begin to shape the new community together.

As various cultural and social-minority members begin to enter a religious congregation, the same listening and reshaping has to occur. There cannot be a simple imposition from either side. The traditions and values of the congregation which are valid need to be learned and absorbed. And some values and experiences from the new members can contribute to the ever growing and changing reality of the congregation.

Mistakes will be made, hurts will be experienced, misunderstandings will develop - all of which need to be addressed openly and simply as soon as they are realized. But mistakes cannot be generalized. If one person errs in some way, then that one person has erred, not all the whites or all the African Americans or all the Hispanics. All of us have to be permitted to make mistakes since we can often learn much from them.

Though I have emphasized that education alone is not enough, it is important that communities receiving new members prepare their people with information and education. Multicultural education is a necessity if anyone is to live in the United States today and in the future. It is one of the first steps, since knowledge is an important base for understanding and since understanding can lead to acceptance and eventually to the creation of the new reality.

Good screening of candidates also continues to be important — using for all candidates the same basic criteria regarding ability to live the religious life and engage in the congregation's mission. To accept an African American because of race even when the individual does not meet the ordinary criteria is a subtle, but real, form of racism. To accept a widow/divorcee who cannot live celibately is a subtle form of sexism. It would be dangerous if, in our desire to prove that we are open and not prejudiced, we began to accept people because they are different rather than because they show signs of being called to live religious life.

It may take us a long time to make the necessary shifts to create a new religious life within the parameters of Jesus' call. If there is anything that we can learn from the world around us, it is that separation is a way of the past. The only way we keep the separation now is through violence.

The world becomes smaller and more mixed all the time. I live in a neighborhood where twenty-seven languages are spoken. We are black and white, Hispanic, Asian, all ages. I watch the children on our street playing. They are like children everywhere. They have friends; they have fights; they make up. They are growing up with very little emphasis on the differences that earlier generations made so much to-do about. They are "at home" with one another. They are the future. And if religious life has a future, it will be from children such as these.

How long will it take? Probably all of life. So it is important to get started. It is important to realize that, while the dominant group in religious life in the United States today has a great deal to do, so do those who do not come from the dominant culture or class. It is not a question of supplanting a white culture with a black or Hispanic one, nor a Western with an Eastern; that would be simply to replace one dominant group with another. What is needed is to create a new religious-life world in which we can all be "at home" — a world deeply human, very

diverse, and therefore deeply religious in the best sense of that word.

Notes

1. Catherine M. Harmer, "Internationality: Intentional or Accidental," *Review for Religious* 52 (January-February, 1993): 111. Janet Malone, "Internationality: At What Price?" *Review for Religious* 51 (January-February 1992): 109.

2. I base this list of "social minorities" on the literature put out by vocation directors of various communities.

3. The material from Dr. John Hill is from my own notes taken during his lectures at the C.O. Jung Institute in Zurich, Switzerland, in January 1993.

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