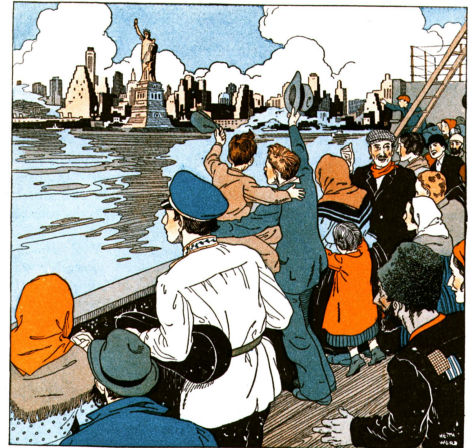


Reflections

Lawrence P. Grayson

E Pluribus Unum

America has always been a pluralistic religious society. The Founders of this nation were primarily Protestants of many persuasions -- Anglicans, Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Quakers, Calvinists, Anabaptists, and Unitarians – along with a few deists and a Catholic or two. As the country grew, large numbers of immigrants entered and continue to come to this land. At first they mainly were from northern and western Europe, then from the southern and eastern parts of that continent, and more recently from Latin and South America. Religious discrimination, persecution, war, famine, and severe economic conditions in other countries gave rise to waves of people from virtually every part of the globe who sought a better life in America. Various Protestant sects emigrated from England, Methodists from Wales, Catholics from Ireland and Italy, Quakers from Norway, Presbyterians from Scotland and Ulster, Mormons from Denmark, Jews from Germany and Russia, groups who profess a variety of Eastern religions from Asia, and, more recently, Catholics and other Christians from Mexico, the Philippines, and various Latin countries, and Muslims from the Middle East.



While many countries in Europe today are religiously diverse, this largely is the result of disruption and decay of previously existent religious unity, often marked by a state-supported church. In America, in contrast, religious pluralism was an originating condition. The attitude of the Founders was exemplified by Samuel Adams when the First Continental Congress convened in 1774. When concern was expressed that the delegates might not be able to begin their deliberations with a prayer because of their divergent religious beliefs, Adams remarked that he could hear a prayer from any gentleman of piety and virtue, as long as he was a friend of the country. This attitude was codified as a national policy by the religion clauses of the First Amendment, which were approved as one of the initial acts of the first Congress, shortly after the Constitution was ratified. As a result, this nation has a continuing history of welcoming immigrants, without consideration of their denomination, and of allowing them to practice their faiths.

A religiously pluralistic society, by its nature, means the coexistence within one political community of groups who hold divergent and incompatible views with regard to theological matters – issues that concern the existence and nature of God and the eschatological purpose and duties of man. While pluralism implies disagreement and dissension on religiously-related matters, it also requires general agreement and consensus on underlying principles for the community to exist.

Creating the proper balance between pluralism and national unity is a difficult social problem. Most countries have forestalled its consideration because they define their citizens in

terms of birth or blood or tribe, and thus make it difficult for outsiders to join the national community. A balance has been achieved in America, although with a continuing struggle, because the sense of national identity is based on a broad underlying consensus on fundamental national values – on the dignity of the human person, the existence of certain inalienable rights, freedom of conscience, and individual liberty. These values and the rights that flow from them were set forth in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Commitment to these principles has encouraged all religious groups, despite their theological disagreements, to participate in society, while allowing each group to maintain its identity. Agreement on these fundamental values could occur because, despite the multitude of Creeds, almost all the faiths and the vast majority of the people in the nation were and are Christian.

While religious beliefs and practices are pluralistic, the overall social culture of America continues to move toward being unitary and secular. Although immigrants bring their home country customs with them which they attempt to maintain in the new setting, within a generation or two their mores and ways are blended into the national mainstream, creating a slightly modified, but still generally uniform way of life.

Public education, the growth of mega-corporations, nationwide marketing, and mass media have been major forces in producing a homogenization, since they bring the whole population, especially the younger generation who are in the most impressionable periods of their lives, under the same influences and ideas. Add to this the strong movement to secularize society and remove religion from the public sphere, and it is exceedingly difficult for any religion to stand against the pervasive and overwhelming pressures of the culture. As a result, the social, political, and even moral views separating religious groups have diminished steadily over time.

In this unitary, secular environment there is little room for transcendental concepts which are fundamental to the Catholic or even the Christian view – of a Creator God, the soul, heaven, hell, and Last Judgment. Today, the values and social attitudes of the entire population, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, have become very alike. The views of many Catholics, in spite of the teachings of the Catholic Church, do not differ appreciably from those of non-Catholics on issues of feminism, the constitution of the family, sexual behavior, homosexuality, the exclusion of religion from the public sphere, human life issues, and similar matters.

If Catholicism is to flourish and continue to affect the secular culture in America – and in Europe -- it is important that Catholics understand and know their faith, be willing to promote and defend their beliefs, and most of all be desirous of leading a Catholic way of life.

The Knights of Columbus is taking a step to assist its members in this regard. Supreme Chaplain Bishop William E. Lori is using his monthly column in *Columbia* magazine to present a faith-formation program. Begun in January of this year, each issue discusses a fundamental aspect of the faith as outlined in the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The aim, as Bishop Lori says, is to give Knights knowledge “to embrace the faith and be the men their families need and society needs.” It behooves each of us to study and take to heart these lessons.