

Protagonist Corner

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There was a time during the fifties and sixties when many Christians said: "It is morally indefensible to segregate people in the United States on the basis of color; therefore, let us integrate our schools and community life." Later, some of these people came to believe that it was not only legally and morally a good thing to go to school and to associate openly in the community with people of other races, but was a gratifying experience which enriched their lives. What was "the right thing" to do had become "a good thing."

I believe the old-line churches helped the attitudes and values of these people change. The churches assisted in their growth. But that was yesterday. Today we have, in many parts of the United States, people who do not want to send their children to integrated schools, speak English or otherwise become integrated into the larger community. Some Hispanic communities, for example, say: "You might want to go to school with us, but we do not want our children to learn your language, values and ways. We want our Spanish-speaking schools." (Remember the major debate as to whether Chinese would be the only language used in the public schools in San Francisco's Chinatown?)

The problem is not one that belongs exclusively to the public schools. The real issue concerns the values that dominate any public institution and/or a community's common life. Whose values or commitments will give shape to public policies, laws and customs?

Neither should the problem be seen only in ethnic terms. Robert Bellah and his colleagues (*Habits of the Heart*) have pointed out that large groups of citizens live in "vocational enclaves." Based on similar education, social position and economics, Americans tend to live, work, worship and socialize with people like themselves. It may not be a conscious decision, but it is a fact that most of us do not live in the pluralistic society, which is the United States, save in the most casual and inconsequential ways, that is riding the rapid transit occasionally and shopping in grocery stores—and even here we tend to segregate ourselves.

There are those who are openly making the decision to isolate themselves, and some are doing so on Christian grounds. There was a time when wealth enabled one to send his/her children to schools that reflected the family enclave's values. Now, the right wing churches are helping by making available to their members schools that teach only their interpretation of reality. The young people can go from these high schools to colleges that do the same thing. One can avoid serious encounters with people, ideas and causes that offend the mind-set of one's enclave.

Incidentally, do not imagine the right has a monopoly on such systems of education. The left has some also.

Thus some thoughtful people like Bellah reflect on whether we can hold

together as a nation and live as a people if we do not share some broad based values and commitments.

The old-line churches may have contributed unintentionally to this fragmentation. The major denominations have tended to protect the individual or minority group in cases of conflict. Without exception they supported the abolition of required prayer in the public schools and did so for the right reasons. In many cases the churches have supported groups' efforts to retain their own language and culture at the expense of not learning English. This has been an honest attempt to honor the heritage and culture of the person and/or the group, even though it may eventually be disruptive for us as a nation.

In the school prayer case, no effort appears to have been made by the old-line churches to recognize the sentiment that prayer or acknowledging the Divine ("In God we trust") is a part of our U.S. civil religion. What alternatives were put forth by the churches which would have abolished required prayer but allowed us to build upon that fragile common belief in the existence of God? I do not think every alternative would have necessarily perpetuated "folk-religion."

Since the old-line churches offered no options in this case and in numerous others, the right wing groups did. After all, they are bound together, not by theology or beliefs, but by commonly held values and sentiments, as Falwell acknowledges. Their solution is to impose their commitments on everyone in the pluralistic society. They want their values to dominate the public domain.

It even appears now that there may be members of the Supreme Court who are willing to let their biases (or convictions or values) determine the shape and content of public law. In other words, the right wing churches are not the only ones eager to force conformity to their values.

Some may argue that the right wing is merely reacting to the problem of pluralism. There are now so many different kinds of people, religions, and races that some people do not believe that we can work together. We do not melt together as the old "melting pot" imagery suggests. Each group wants to hold on to its own values and thus we either have continuous conflict or we isolate ourselves from one another.

Others contend that the problem lies in the very nature of our modern technological society. The society is said to be individualistic, bureaucratic, acquisitive, therapeutic, and Lord knows what else. The conditions of modern society push us into enclave styles of living. And many of these critics do not believe that socialism is any better; it is also a form of modern technological life.

And so it is true that American society is truly more pluralistic than ever before. In this threatening situation the temptation is to impose one's own values on others, or else "our" form of society will disappear. The more liberal churches have reacted to protect the nation against such an imposition and doing so have contributed to leaving the public arena devoid of values.

Alasdair MacIntyre (*After Virtue*) has proposed that it is possible for people of goodwill to construct new forms of community within which civility and morality might flourish. I believe the old-line churches should take an aggressive lead in this task. This is neither attempting to force our beliefs on all of

society, nor is it simply letting the secularists set the agenda for our common life. It is rather learning to work with people of goodwill in constructing a society based on values and commitments shared by the great variety of peoples who compose the U.S.A. today.