

When the same is not the same

Joan Chittister | Jul. 26, 2007 From Where I Stand

Perhaps one of the best ways to discover who we are as a culture is to go visit some other culture. The experience is an interesting one.

One of the most exciting parts of the excursion is the opportunity it gives us to discover the effects of history on us -- as a people, as a culture, even as a church.

This last month, for instance, I've been in New Zealand and Australia. Believe me, however much we look alike, we are different peoples.

As I heard Australians talk about themselves and the worldview with which they'd grown up -- a British outpost in an Asian sea -- I became fascinated with the idea of how unlike people can be, no matter how alike their roots, traditions and cultures may seem to be at first glance.

We -- Americans and Australians -- do seem very similar in many ways: We speak the same language. We are both people agleam with a sense of newness, technology, wealth and "progress." We are self-confident types, secure in our affluence, certain of our pragmatism. We do not view the rest of the world with diffidence or timidity. We are both can-do people, a kind of modern colossi in a still developing world. And we both spring from the same root. Or so it appears.

But, I discovered, there are deep differences among us, too.

"Characterize the Australian Catholic church for me," I asked group after group, person after person, as we talked.

"What will happen here as a result of the restoration of the Latin Mass, for instance?" I asked in an attempt to make the question immediate and real, to discover in the answers something specific about the present nature of the church. I expected deep and reflective answers, full of either triumph or tension, tainted with concern or confusion. Thoughtful. Maybe even a bit anguished. Cautious.

Forget it. The answer was direct: "Nothing will happen," most of them said. "We won't pay any attention to it,"

some said. "If anybody wants it, let them take it," a few said. "But not me," many said. End of discussion.

So how is it, I pressed them, that they can be so blasé -- so actually disinterested -- about the situation when we, on the other hand, seem so intense about even the possibility of it? The answers to that one were even more interesting. Instead of discussing the pros and cons of a Latin Mass, they discussed the nature of their society. They cited four characteristics of the culture, which, they say, marks the nature of the church there.

First, Australia was founded to be a British penal colony, a settlement for convicts -- many of them Irish -- who had been exiled from Ireland for stealing bread during the famine or being part of an anti-English nationalism that simply refused to surrender to the rule of the Crown. Point: Australians do not take authority easily.

There is in them, they say, a natural independence, a skepticism, a suspicion, about the imposition of anything on anybody.

Americans, on the other hand, it occurred to me, were founded by Puritans, very authority-centered religious types. We take laws seriously. And more than that, we suspect anyone who doesn't.

Secondly, Australians are a laid-back group to begin with. Neuroticism is not their national charism.

Nothing seems to bother Australians much. They're casual about everything -- clothes, rules, work and church. "On a good day," they told me, "no more than 12 percent of the population would go to Mass for anything."

We, on the other hand, are a very church-going society. Even at our worst, an average of 35 percent of U.S. Catholics say they go to church on Sunday. Here, we center our lives around our churches. There they center the church around their lives.

In the third place, they told me, Australia defines itself as a secular state, a state not defined by any religious orientation -- Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Christian or anything else. Religion is not a matter for the state, as far as Australians are concerned. The purpose of the state is to assure the general welfare, not the religious ideals of any single religion. They would certainly be horrified at the thought of putting their flag in the sanctuary of their churches.

In the United States, though we were founded by Deists with no specific religion in mind and promising freedom to all of them, we are still in the throes of trying to determine the implications of that for us as a people. Are we a "Christian" state or a pluralistic state -- meaning based on no particular denominational moral view or devoted to maintaining Christian identity even in our civic institutions. And if so, what does that mean for legislation and legislators and churches here? Are they part of the political arena or not? Is it the function of churches to teach morality or is it the function of the state to promote Christian morals? And if so, what of all the other moral perspectives in such a society?

Finally, Australia is an Anglo-Saxon culture in the midst of an Asian world. It is made up of multi-cultural ethnic groups whose orientation is more devotional than dogmatic, as Pacific as it is Western, spiritual but

largely non-doctrinal. As a result, the struggle for the legalization of religious principles seldom invades the federal arena. Moral guidelines they care about. Attempts by religious figures to influence party politics or to equate political decisions with denominational purity -- as in "If you don't vote this way, you should ask yourself if you are really Catholic" -- they do not appreciate.

In the United States, religious identity and its place in politics is a thread that runs through the history of this country like gold in rock. From the time of William Penn and his bold model of religious freedom, the struggle to enshrine one set of religious ideals or another in law has been a fierce one here. It has come to the point, in fact, that religion -- if single issue voting is really religion -- stalks politics here in every sermon, on every bumper sticker, as the most salient measure of every candidate. The way we vote, we say, has something to do with how religious we are.

No doubt about it: Australia and the United States are not the same kind of religious worlds.

From where I stand, then, the question has to be, how is it that we really are so much alike? Or better yet, which of us is really the most religious?

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