

# **Understanding Pluralism and Its Effect on Culture and Bioethics**

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*Although the paths to the summit may differ, from the top one sees the same moon  
Traditional Japanese saying*

*In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit. (Judges 21:25)*

When people visit Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty located in New York Harbor, more often than not they walk away from this National monument with a greater understanding and appreciation for what the various past immigrant communities endured, as well as contributed, to the American way of life. The statement, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free” expresses the heart and soul of what Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty represent. Those inspiring words are proudly displayed on the Statue of Liberty, declaring to the world that the human family which makes up the population of the United States is a diverse community of individuals, embracing a common dream of freedom, prosperity and identity. Though initially the majority of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century immigrants originated from Europe, a more complex mixture of ethnic cultures from all parts of the globe are finding their way to this nation, creating a cultural melting pot, producing a challenging blend of creativity, vitality and tension.

Many have believed that the incredible diversity in race, ethnicity and culture that was becoming a part of the American populace would somehow reshape or morph into a distinctive ethos unique to the United States. It is a complex matter, to say the least, to evaluate and predict how individuals or groups leaving behind their traditional cultures, composed of different religious beliefs, moral standards and heritages, will adapt to a new American culture. This is true especially when the nation as a whole tries to adopt various aspects of what epitomizes right and good living, as well as instituting structures to handle the vast number of social, economic, political and spiritual issues that affect the entire population. The complexity of the human family experience produces a pluralism that for the most part needs to be accepted. In other words, “we have to learn to live with it. Such is the basic condition for living together; but this also constitutes the major difficulty for living together, for cooperating in the search for a common good. We have to face this paradox” (Pellegrino, E., Mazzarella, P. and Corsi, P., 1992, p.100).

D.A. Carson provides an excellent definition of pluralism in his book entitled, *The Gagging of God*. He writes, “Pluralism refers to the sheer diversity of race, value systems, heritage, language, culture and religion in many Western and some other nations.” Many within the United States as well as other nations see cultural diversity or pluralism as a very healthy part of societal makeup which should not be feared. Various individuals and groups in government, private business and numerous public institutions promote and celebrate cultural diversity on a routine basis, and believe that a growing pluralism contributes to the overall good of the general

cultural American landscape. Yet there are those who see our growing infatuation with pluralism as a means to express and incorporate into our communities a destructive cultural phenomenon called postmodernism. Postmodernism is a philosophy that basically resists unified, all-encompassing, and universally valid explanations and replaces them with a respect for a community-based understanding of truth. In other words, "...there is no absolute truth; rather, truth is relative to the community in which we participate" (Grenz, p.8, 1996).

African Americans across the nation reacted to comments made by Bill Cosby concerning dysfunctional black families in a Washington Times article entitled, "Cosby's Tough Love Creates Black Furor." The article centered on Mr. Cosby's statements criticizing some blacks for poor parenting and moral bankruptcy. He also focused on certain media influences, such as hip-hop and rap lyrics, that he believes degrade African American women and promote sexually immoral behavior. The article stated that music lyrics and other media messages "contribute to the cycle of teen pregnancy and an 'epidemic' high school dropout rate approaching 50 percent in inner cities." Some within the black community have praised Bill Cosby's bold and controversial statements, while others call him an elitist, out of touch with his own race. The article also pointed out that certain black educators who agree with Mr. Cosby are disappointed that young black men and women are bypassing or ignoring educational opportunities that were gained through the civil rights movement. Melanie Lewis, chairwomen of the English department at Cosumnes River College in Sacramento, California, states in the same newspaper article that students tell her they cannot come to class on particular days "because I have to make it to Foot Locker to buy the latest hot shoe," or they drop out of school because "they couldn't handle the demands of the class, and yet they're driving real nice cars and wearing expensive clothes."

Similar concerns have been voiced by other African American authors, scholars, theologians and activists on the disintegration of the black family, especially in the urban environment. Cornel West in his thought-provoking book, *Race Matters*, presented his passionate viewpoints on a number of racial issues. One of these issues centered on Mr. West's belief that there is a pervasive spiritual impoverishment growing within our American culture. He goes on to state,

We have created rootless, dangling people with little link to supportive networks—family, friends, schools—that sustain some purpose in life. We have witnessed the collapse of the spiritual communities that in the past helped Americans face despair, disease, and death and that transmit through the generations dignity and decency, excellence and elegance (pp.9-10).

Many influential leaders in the African American community, including Bill Cosby and Cornel West, believe that minorities, especially the black minority, are being caught up in a culture of poverty that doesn't allow them to function in a healthy manner. These two leaders believe that if these unhealthy mannerisms are allowed to propagate or continue to form, a Black culture will be established that favors negative traits and destructive behavior.

Disturbing statistics have been published by the Center for Disease Control (CDC), showing that the number one cause of death in the African American community is abortion. A July 1999 CDC Abortion Surveillance Report revealed 35% of abortions in the United States are performed on African American women, while they represent only 12% of the female population of the country. CDC National Vital Statistics Reports (Vol. 47, No. 29) also exposed startling results,

that the abortion rate among married African American women is 4.4 times greater than it is among married white women. CDC statistics state that since 1973 over 13 million African American pre-born babies have been aborted in the United States, as compared to the combined total of approximately 4.8 million black men, women and children dying of AIDS, heart disease, cancer, violent crimes and accidents over the same time period. As we enter the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century these startling statistics concerning aborted black babies continue to increase at a rate of approximately 1400 surgical abortions per day. These statistics are somewhat unknown within the black American community, and are never reported by the mainstream media.

For the most part the African American community believes it still has a strong link to black foremothers and forefathers in protecting their families. These protective traditions primarily consisted of black religious and civic institutions that sustained family and communal networks of support. When the above statistics are revealed to African Americans, they are generally shocked, and find it difficult to believe the mind-numbing abortion numbers. Is this lack of understanding or perspective within the black population part of a culture of poverty, or is it something more subtle, perhaps pluralism, that actually underpins postmodernism? "The central hallmark of postmodern cultural expression is pluralism" (Grenz, p.20, 1996).

Michael Jindra in his essay, *Understanding the Cultures of American Ethnic Groups* writes, "...culture is a social group's distinctive way of life, the beliefs and practices that a culture finds 'normal' and correct." In American's early history the Native American and African American presence didn't seem to significantly change or contribute to the main Anglo American and European cultural influence. Times have changed though, and present American culture is no longer dominated by what many call a Caucasian way of life, but includes a complex mix of humanity who trace their roots to various parts of the world.

American culture is not a simple thing to explain. Many from Asian, Latin American and Middle Eastern backgrounds are finding it difficult to accept an all pervasive American culture of Western European beliefs and customs that compete against their own cultural definitions and practices. It became very apparent in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, that the U.S. is a nation of diverse people, who want to enjoy the freedoms and prosperity that America offers, but do not want to totally divorce themselves from past traditions, or lose their cultural identity.

One demographic that has greatly influenced America's cultural pluralism is the shifting of African Americans from rural communities to urban environments, especially in the industrialized north. Also, the post-1965 immigration policy of allowing increased numbers of non-European immigrants into the U.S. has produced a Latin American and Asian cultural invasion. Since many of these have migrated to large cities, a very diverse urban environment has been created, which introduces a new level of ethnic challenges.

Although cultural pluralism provides a rich and vibrant scope of individual and group interactions, perceived discrimination, mutual stereotyping, and competition for economic resources inevitably cause tensions and subsequent problems. This pluralism can also produce a variety of misunderstandings because of varying communication styles and family dynamics. For instance, family and communal issues, which are central to all cultures, create uneasiness between competing or domineering cultures because of fear, misconceptions, and lack of knowledge. Also, pressures within each culture can generate familial problems that produce emotional scars for generations.

The tragic history of the Black American experience under slavery demonstrated how most African social institutions, including marriage, were severely put at risk, causing not only dysfunctional family lifestyles, but loss of individual and group identity.

Under slavery, family life suffered, as spouses and children were often kept apart, and men were essentially emasculated, denied normal roles of husband and provider. According to sociologist Orlando Patterson (1998), problems that beset the African American family, such as low marriage and high single parenthood rates, and tension between the sexes, can be traced back to the time of slavery (Jindra, p.29, 2004).

Tensions within family dynamics, along with racial earmarks that lumped African Americans into a “black” color category, depicting them as dependent and lazy by “whites,” who saw themselves as civilized and intelligent, helped fuel the fire of discontent, poor self image, and the desire to seek victim status for the sins of the nation’s forefathers. These tendencies and the need to establish an identity amongst all the other cultures within America’s population could be a destructive ingredient that opens cultural doors for postmodernism under the guise of pluralism.

To better understand how postmodernism could undermine America’s minority cultures, it is important to examine the influence of religious pluralism, which includes legal and social acceptance of different religions, as well as a positive affirmation or celebration of religious diversity. A problematic result of religious pluralism is the idea that no single religion can legitimately claim to be distinctively true and normative for all people in all cultures at all times. This concept should draw deep concern from Christians, since it goes against their central claims, and seems to follow the tenets of postmodernism.

The story of American religious pluralism begins in the colonial period with Protestant faith manifesting both unity and denominational diversity. Though dissention caused some rifts within the Protestant culture, a measure of consensus was established. “All other differences aside, America was, in this cultural sense, a Christian, which again meant Protestant, nation” (Hunter, p.68, 1991).

In the early 1800s a massive influx of Catholic and Jewish immigrants began to change the balance of religious influence in the United States. “By the 1920s, 17 percent of the American population was Catholic, the single largest denomination in the country...By the mid 1920s, the number of Jews had jumped to 4 million...” (Hunter, p.69-70, 1991). Though severe tensions surfaced between Protestant, Catholic and Jew during the early part of the 20th Century, the middle of the century saw some of the old prejudices softening between these three religious bodies, eventually allowing them to form a new pluralistic balance around a broader Judeo-Christian consensus.

After World War II new faiths began to expand American religious pluralism, as religious traditions from Asia, Middle East, India and other non-Western countries appeared in greater numbers. Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists, as well as people seeking exotic new religious experiences or becoming involved in quasi-Christian groups, started to upset the balance of religious pluralism dominated by the Judeo-Christian faiths. “For example, in 1934 there was only one mosque in the United States and fewer than 20,000 Muslims. By 1988 there were 600 mosques or Islamic Centers and more than 4 million adherents nationwide” (Hunter, p.73, 1991). In the expanding religious pluralism are also those who claim no particular religious affiliation or belief. These individuals, known as secularists, are usually highly educated and professional, and

espouse a humanistic or an ethical worldview that makes human well-being the ultimate standard.

The expansion of cultural and religious pluralism has put the long-standing Judeo-Christian consensus in jeopardy. America seems to be moving toward a religious pluralism which basically accepts the perspective that all of the major religions are equally true and provide equally legitimate ways in which to respond to divine reality. Biblical principles that were once a part of public debate, especially on moral issues, are often pushed aside. In fact, social scientists and many in the public arena believe religious perspectives are so varied that they are no longer relevant to public issues, even in moral discourse.

If the current trend continues, American religious pluralism will create an atmosphere that will not allow religious perspectives to shape the nation's future moral direction in policy and law. Groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) will fill the religious vacuum to influence the shaping of public policy, and pressure the expansion of moral pluralism in a variety of areas. Some of these areas already include pornography (i.e., right of free speech) and sex education in the public schools (i.e., right to education and informed choice). Taking the erosion of religious consensus to its logical end, moral issues such as gay marriage, active euthanasia, fetal tissue research, boy-man sex and others will become a part of the American culture. "Indeed, the advocates of these changes already use the logic of legally protected individual rights to justify their practice. By its very nature, the libertarian impulse in progressive moral philosophy is to 'invent rights, ever more rights...'" (Hunter, p.310, 1991).

An understanding of postmodernism and multiculturalism is needed to set the stage to reveal how these cultural phenomena could further influence America's cultural pluralism in areas such as bioethics. There is disagreement among scholars about exactly what postmodernism entails, but overall they accept one point: this phenomenon rejects the idea that there is one universal worldview.

Postmodernism showed its influence in architecture, education and popular culture in the late 20th Century. Its roots go back to the late 19th Century, when men such as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) began attacking the popular intellectual ethos of his time, the Enlightenment. This era, influenced by the Renaissance, elevated the individual self or human reason to the center of the world, and rejected a number of scientific claims advanced by the Christian Church during the Middle Ages. Enlightenment thinkers believed in the goodness of discovering knowledge, and had absolute faith in human rational capabilities to use knowledge in the advancement of societal needs. Their optimism concerning humankind's ability to find objective truth through reason was accepted in many intellectual and scientific circles, but its influence began to wane in the 20th Century, especially in the later portion.

During the 1960s and up to the 21st Century postmodern critics have methodically and effectively declared that there are no absolute truths, only a plurality of truths consisting of differing viewpoints and perspectives, as well as different paths to knowledge, such as emotions and intuition. "Most postmoderns make the leap of believing that this plurality of truths can exist alongside one another. The postmodern consciousness, therefore, entails a radical kind of relativism and pluralism" (Grenz, p.14, 1996).

This postmodern consciousness, that claims truth is culturally based and that absolute truth is a fallacy, is gaining a foothold in America's pluralistic culture. Postmodern thought thrives in the areas of education and popular culture. We can see this ethos gaining momentum under the banner of multiculturalism, whose adherents place demands on American society to be more

sensitive to language, inclusiveness, and tolerance. These concepts seem reasonable until the deeper agenda is unwrapped.

When addressing sensitivity to language, the multiculturalist has developed a “politically correct” list of words or phrases to insure that minority groups will not have to endure words or ideas that may trample on their feelings or self-esteem. This focus on so-called unsuitable phrases or opinions could alter dialogue on such issues as homosexuality and welfare, because multiculturalism labels it as hate speech. In the area of inclusion, multiculturalists want all groups to guide school curricula, as well as having their ideas accepted and incorporated into the marketplace of ideas. This basically equates into every group from Hispanics to gay rights activists editing educational courses and community standards to fit their perspectives. The concept of tolerance under multiculturalism takes on the notion “...that no truth transcends culture, that no idea or moral concept might be true for every cultural group or every human being. As a result, multiculturalists demand that we give up our beliefs in moral absolutes and become moral relativists” ( Closson, p.3, 1998).

In the area of reproductive rights, the multicultural and postmodern influence seems to have a pluralistic link that can be traced through language, inclusion and tolerance, which helped launch the necessary mechanisms within American pluralism to socially accept the killing of preborn children as a personal right. Before the 1973 Supreme Court decision of Roe v Wade, abortion on demand was illegal in most states. In fact, no state prior to 1967 allowed legal abortions, except to save the life of the mother. Terms such as “baby,” “child” and “little one” were very common when describing the unborn. After the 1973 decision, terms such as “fetus,” “potential life,” “blob of tissue,” “product of conception” and “non-person” began to describe the preborn. The terms “pro-choice” and “a woman’s reproductive right” became popular substitutions for those who were “pro-abortion.” The media was very influential in using the new terminology supporting abortion on demand, and negative words and phrases (e.g., “those against reproductive rights”, “anti-abortion”, “stopping those seeking health care”) to depict those against abortion as cruel and insensitive people. A war of words was established within the growing American pluralism to convey an empathetic message toward women and minorities, without regard to the preborn. In 1992 this battle over language in the realm of reproductive rights was again influenced by a postmodern mindset in the area of constitutional law. A majority of Supreme Court judges decided in Planned Parenthood v Casey that “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”

The idea of inclusiveness essentially promotes the incorporation of all groups, leaving no one out, yet multiculturalists and their postmodern ethos focus mainly on those they call “marginalized” people within America’s pluralistic culture. These people are usually defined as minorities and women by multiculturalists, and they believe these groups should be given equal status with the majority of Americans in shaping the nation’s political, educational, spiritual, economic and social institutions. To achieve greater inclusion of minorities and women, multiculturalists at times initiate a postmodern form of justice that fights for victim status. For instance, past political activity saw many of our nation’s legislators involved in seeking reparations for present day African Americans for injustices imposed on their slave ancestors. Though no one currently living was ever an American slave, many in political and social circles believed this victim status and the subsequent monetary award would heal old wounds, improve black self image, and reinsure their inclusion in the American culture. Others see this acceptance

of victim's rights as a postmodern way of inventing rights for everyone or anyone, since the concept of moral truth is a moving target from culture to culture.

In the case of abortion, postmodern thought does allow inclusion for the concerns of the doctor, husband, other family members, those who believe the preborn child is a person at conception, and those who think otherwise, but the underlining belief system sees the woman as a marginalized person, who has the right to do whatever she thinks is best for herself, even if it includes the destruction of her preborn child. For some African Americans, the right to an abortion may be viewed in the broader context of a "civil right" as opposed to a "personal right."

Problems within the black community are well documented, and in conjunction with historical struggles, African Americans have grown weary of hearing about difficulties in their community. Organizations such as Planned Parenthood (PP) have had a long and successful relationship with the black community. PP professional philosophy supports a victim status mentality for minorities, as well as an educational process that includes postmodern language adhering to the issues of multicultural sensitivity. Other organizations such as the National Organization of Women (NOW) along with PP promote inclusive ideas that foster the perception that White women have long enjoyed access to reproductive choices. These organizations encourage black women to seek equality with white women by demanding access to abortion as a right, where it had previously been denied. Also, support from the black church for abortion on demand can be seen in its silence. In one long-term study entitled, *The Abortion Attitudes of Black Women: 1972-1991*, 1970s church attendance was cited as a primary determinant of a prolife position. During the last decade of the 20th Century a visible prolife position in the black church has virtually disappeared.

Finally, the multiculturalist concept of tolerance centers on the idea that no truth transcends culture. In essence, tolerance actually becomes the major focus in a postmodern world. This postmodern worldview becomes a multiculturalist litmus test for education, economics, politics and the entertainment industry. To argue that some action might be morally wrong for all people all the time, violates the doctrine of postmodern tolerance.

An article in the *Chicago Tribune* entitled *Kerry alone courts NAACP*, may be an indicator how deeply ingrained abortion on demand is established within the African American community. The article stated, "...NAACP leaders have accused Bush of selling snake oil and practicing racial division. They have compared his views on abortion to the Taliban's policies toward women..." This article exposes a cultural attitude on abortion held by black leaders such as Julian Bond and Kweisi Mfume, of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Their harsh criticism of President Bush, who held a more conservative view on this controversial issue, seemed to be directed at his lack of tolerance or acceptance of current abortion policies. The idea that President Bush did not agree with abortion on demand policies was automatically seen as oppressive and dangerous by NAACP leadership. This type of reaction confirmed the desire of this black oriented organization to promote abortion as a right, even at the expense of destroying millions of potential black men and women.

The popular culture is also an area where postmodernism thrives in America's pluralism. The arts, television and films provide a unique power for creativity, especially in the ability to mix fact with fiction. A person can sit down and watch hours of television, exposing himself to numerous incompatible images that can leave the impression that all that has been viewed is equally important. The record industry has combined music, lyrics and video producing a collage of sound and images that place events, ideas and conflicts in an unprioritized order, again giving

the sense that all things are equally important. The harsh lyrics of hip hop and rap create a distorted view of respect of women, authority and human rights, as young men and women living in the inner cities deal with the pluralism and dysfunctionality surrounding them. As respect for authority dwindles, a new code of the streets is developing, as street-oriented minorities set their own moral guidelines to protect their safety and way of life. If moral pluralism expands and no religious or moral center is identified, the code of the streets will naturally gravitate toward power and pleasure, resulting in a lack of respect for life both in and out of the womb.

The Christian response to pluralism and the postmodern ethos is to realize first that pluralism in and of itself is not to be feared or even rejected. Heaven is and will always be pluralistic, as the Apostle John writes, "After this I looked and there before me was great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb..." (Revelation 7:9). The key difference between heavenly pluralism and the current earthly model is that one is under the absolute moral truths and authority of God, while the other is greatly influenced by people who reject the idea of one truth, one life and one way.

Ideas do have consequences, and postmodernism, with its mantra of sensitivity, inclusion and tolerance, needs to be understood and confronted by Christians with the grace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is for a time such as this that Christians need to be "salt and light" to profess the Gospel, yet still show sensitivity and tolerance through love for those who are rejecting the Good News. Tolerance in its absolute humanistic form inevitably accepts cultural ideas or rituals, such as human sacrifice and helping the sick and poor as equally valid, if they are accepted or useful for a given culture. Christians need to transcend culture with the Gospel where multiculturalist arguments fail to influence. If not, the alternative is a nation of people who will be blind to moral choices and consider themselves as final judges on how they and others should live.

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