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“LOVE ME; LOVE MY RELIGION?” Yes? Or No?

- 1 I pose my title this month in the form of a question: “If you love me, then must you also love my religion?” Do we answer yes or no to that question? I suppose the question could even be broadened: “If you love me, then must you also love my values, my beliefs, my principles, my practices?”
- 2 The question has gained some urgency since November 8, 2016. I write these lines from my home in Canada – as I have for more than twenty years now, since this “Worship Workbench” series began at this website. But my place of birth was the USA. And I am these days a dual citizen, voting – and paying taxes! – in both USA and Canada.
- 3 I’m referring here of course to the recent American election of November 8, 2016, in which the USA, in my view, has suddenly taken an unexpected lurch to the right. So questions of tolerance and brotherly affection are again under scrutiny, as they have not been for perhaps several generations.
- 4 And Christians, among others, find themselves asking – and having to answer – such questions as my title poses. In a nutshell for our purposes here: “If my Christian faith compels me to love my neighbour, does it also then compel me to love my neighbour’s religion? My neighbour’s values? My neighbour’s beliefs and principles and practices?”
- 5 For myself, I find my own answer to the question I pose above to be in the negative: No. My Christian faith compels me to love my neighbour. Yes, certainly, without question. I’ll cite *Matthew 22:34-46*: Jesus’ words “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets...” I’m aware that other religions can quote a similar sentiment from their Sacred Scriptures.
- 6 But does my faith compel me, oblige me, also to love my neighbour’s faith? My neighbour’s religion? My neighbour’s principles and practices? Most certainly No. Hear me out.
- 7 Suppose, for example, that my neighbour’s religion requires human sacrifice? That was apparently the situation in many of the ancient tribes already occupying the land that God presumably offered to the children of Israel. And the story of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac, and God’s forbidding that human sacrifice and instead substituting “a ram caught in a thicket” nearby – according to at least one tradition – is precisely remembered – contrary to Kierkegaard! – as a Divine repudiation of all human sacrifice henceforth among the Jews.
- 8 Is the situation greatly improved with the substituting of a living animal sacrifice for a living human

one? Yes, I suppose you could argue that. But it's revealing to note that apparently many ancient peoples joined the Jews, in due course, in repudiating not only human sacrifice, but also animal sacrifice, as the years went by, substituting first grain and cereal offerings, and finally in our day, substituting money.

9 I'd be willing to count myself among those who consider that movement a significant mark of human moral progress. (Lutherans are often conspicuously suspicious of any notion of moral progress in the human story.) But at least this Lutheran finds himself willing to acknowledge that the human species has indeed progressed morally.

10 Sure, "the old Adam" is always among us and within us. But hey, most human beings today will acknowledge that human slavery, for example, is as odious as human sacrifice. That sentiment is new, even among good, sincere, Bible-believing Christians, who used the Bible, in earlier days, to justify human slavery. So we have progressed, after all, by golly!

11 Here's a second illustration of my point: Suppose my neighbour's religion requires the subjugation of women to men? Must I, in loving my neighbour, also love this value, this principle or practice?

12 Once again, I could not bring myself to do that.

13 An example: For what it's worth, the rural Minnesota Slovak Lutheran congregation of my wife's upbringing held to this principle, requiring men to sit apart from women at worship – men on one side of the church, women on the other side. And men communed first. Women – including their own wives! – communed after all the men had communed! They abandoned both of those practices, in later years, you'll be glad to know.

14 But many literalist and fundamentalist Christians still follow a similar sex discrimination, and use the Bible's own words to support it. (I'm not talking Muslims or Orthodox Jews here; I'm talking *Christians*!) Could you endorse that practice today, faithful reader? I couldn't. And I am convinced that, although I must strenuously endeavour to love those who do endorse the subjugation of women to men, my faith does not require me to follow their example. Here or in other matters.

15 Here's still a final example, this one closer to the topic of worship, my focus in these postings. Suppose my neighbour's faith requires prostrating for public prayer? Or kneeling? Or even bowing the head? Must my loving that neighbour include endorsing these practices?

16 I will yield to no one in my appreciation of the body's role in worship. What we do in our bodies, with our bodies, has tremendous power to preach, to teach, to witness. In worship as elsewhere. That's first and foremost.

17 Hence my own unwillingness to join even fellow Christian worshippers in prostrating, in kneeling or even in bowing the head. My understanding of Christian anthropology forbids any of that. Except in the most specific of circumstances. Like moments of Individual Confession. Perhaps appropriate also at a Rite of Public Confession in Lent.

18 Aside: Lest I be misinterpreted, I believe the fundamental attitude of Christians towards others should be this. Every human being is capable of learning something new and even inspiring from another human being. We each have something to learn, to receive, from each other. We each have something to teach, to give, to each other.

19 Further: I like to think of myself as a good guest. So if I'm visiting as guest in your church, and

the practice there is to kneel for every prayer, sure, I'll try to kneel with these arthritic knees. I'll probably grumble under my breath. And I might make my witness to you later over lunch. But I'll try to follow your practice, in your place of worship.

20 But prostrating, kneeling, and bowing are public prayer postures uncongenial to both Jewish and Christian pieties, I will maintain. (And have maintained throughout these twenty years of postings!) Jewish piety speaks of the *imago dei*, the image of God in us. Hence Jews – and Christians! – ought always to stand at prayer, in the lovely and evocative *orans* (“praying”) posture. And Christian piety testifies to the *Aufherstehung*: The “Standing Erect” of Christ, the Resurrection posture of the risen Christ.

21 Therefore, for reasons I cite in 20 above, and others, I'll argue: The *orans* is the preferred prayer posture in both Jewish and Christian traditions: Standing erect, arms outspread, palms up and open, in a lovely gesture evoking an eager and willing reception of all the gifts God gives. And head raised – not lowered! – with face lifted and eyes open (Yes!) and fixed on infinity – “up there” somewhere. (Hey, the Pentecostals have something to teach Lutherans!)

22 That is how, in my view, Christians ought always to pray. (*Psalm* 95:6 to the contrary: “...Let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker...” part of the so-called Venite, a traditional element in Matins.) *Psalm* 95 and verses like it – I will assert without being able to offer any evidence! – have been influenced by non-Jewish Near Eastern notions of abject obeisance before a cruel and despotic Caliph or other potentate, and do not provide a worthy model for either Jewish or Christian prayer.

23 Further, I have heard an anthropologist maintain that kneeling at prayer derived from the battlefield: Hands clasped before you – awaiting the chains of slavery. Head bowed, and eyes understandably closed – awaiting the sword of execution. Kneeling only entered Christian piety and practice as late as the Fourth Century, he argued. Also not a worthy model for Christian prayer.

24 No, my God – the God of Abraham and of Jesus – does not want me to grovel, or to cower, or to cringe at worship. Or you to grovel or cower or cringe. Or any representative of a Beloved Creation. We are royalty, in Christ. Christian humility is quite another thing.

25 I notice – to my own surprise! – in writing these paragraphs that they constitute a kind of warrant for Christian proselytizing, for Christian missionary endeavours.

26 Aside: For what it's worth, I'll endorse the view of Gregory Baum, the great Canadian Roman Catholic theological Superstar, who maintains that Christians have no right to try to proselytize or to convert anyone happy or content in their own religion. That seems like good ecumenical and inter-faith advice to me. It seems to honour my neighbour, properly. Generously.

27 But nevertheless, what I've argued in the paragraphs above does indeed seem to me to represent a kind of “giving an account of the hope that is in [me].”

28 So: Sorry, folks: My faith, my religion, my religious piety and practice may not be simply *different* from my neighbours'. But also, yes – I'm compelled to say it – *better* than theirs. More rationally respectable. Supremely: more humane. Even that of my more conservative *Christian* neighbours!

29 I hope I'm not being arrogant or patronizing in my claims. I hope I'm arguing my case with proper Christian humility. Let's talk.