

A 11. THE PROBLEMS OF PLURALISTIC SOCIETIES

We all live in nations whose populations are usually far from being homogeneous--they are said to be pluralistic societies. Each nation is composed of groups of people who differ from each other in appearance, in ethnic background, in aspects of their culture such as their language, their customs & practices, their values, their religion or their ideology.

Some of these groups live in the same neighborhoods others of us do, and their children may even play with our children. But when people differ from "us" ("us" being a member of any one group), they are suspect. We may sometimes imagine them to be inferior to us in some respect or other. We may even tend to be suspicious of them, even a little afraid of them. We are worried about our children playing with theirs. We fear they may corrupt our culture.

Maybe more important, we may fear that they might get too much power in the community, or come to dominate our government etc. All this is natural--it is normal human nature. But all this presents a social problem that needs to be dealt with.

The problem is that we all need to get along well with each other and avoid conflicts that could become serious and even violent at times. Better yet, we need to learn to enjoy our differences, different customs, different forms of entertainment etc. We need to find things we can enjoy doing together so we can enjoy each others company. This will increase our understanding of each other. As we thus get to know each other in the neighborhood we may even find ways to help each other upon occasion. Thus we realize first that there are exceptions to our low opinion of those different people--some of them are much like us, and are fine people. Some people will not get past that point, while others will realize that the "foreign people" they know well are not exceptions, and that however much peoples may differ even in some important respects, they are not so much different from us after all, though brought up in a different way.

When diverse groups reach this point, they may be able to work together to develop their country in ways that they work out together.

This is far better than a political situation in which all groups jockey for positions in government from which they try to get special advantages for members of their own group. When they are really working together they can easily support anything that appears to offer mutual benefits to all groups in a pluralistic country instead of favoring any one group. There is always the further requirement that the mutual benefits be equitably divided among the pluralistic groups, for if they are not, that can become a source of friction and potential conflict unless there is a subsequent redivision of benefits which the groups feel is equitable.

What would be the ideal for pluralistic societies to try to strive for?

The ideal would be for the nation's people and government to strive to do whatever possible to provide every individual fair & ample opportunities throughout their lives to develop their choice of their fine potentialities.

It would be difficult for anyone or any group to claim that some other group of people should not have such fair chances & opportunities.

It must be recognized, however, that when pluralism started to develop within nations, the group that was a clear majority did rule the country in their own interest, usually ignoring any minority insofar as possible. The minority's job in any such situation is to try to get representation in government proportionate to their numbers, and then get government to guarantee some rights to minorities that will not be abridged by government itself, and then extend those rights so they may not be abridged by anyone or any group in the country.

The documents that led to the founding of the United States of America included some noble statements that all people are born equal and entitled to the same rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It later became apparent that not all people in this country had exactly the same ideas as to equality, for at the beginning, only adult white male property owning citizens found that only they really had the right to vote. Some of us are now amazed at the length of time it took, and the struggles we as a people went through, to extend voting rights.

The idea that there are human rights that should be applied to all people has grown since our origins, and one conception of those rights was embodied in the Declaration of Human Rights widely proclaimed after World War II. But there are still many people who think they are entitled to some rights as a matter of course but that those rights should not be available to some minorities within the country.

Unfortunately there are some entire groups, usually identifiable within some religions, that do not share the above conception of human rights at all. The ideal of each such group, and there is more than one such, is to establish their own theocracy where they would rule others and enforce laws which they say no one dare criticize for that would amount to criticism of God from whom those laws were said to be derived.

Where any such group remains a minority, others must work together so as not to allow theocrats to rule everyone else as they would rule themselves, for minorities sometimes do get power to rule a country. Even where theocrats are a majority, they almost certainly will rule, and then the question is whether they will grant any minority rights to non-believers in their religion. Theocrats have a right to theocratic rule only where they are the only ones ruled. They must be required to grant minority rights to those who do not share their religion. Such rights should never be denied when any dissent.