



*The 2004 Aus Memorial Lectures:
Lecture One*

Do Not Be Afraid!
**The Call to Evangelism and
Christian Intellectuals**

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“**B**e not afraid!” These words echoed across San Pietro Piazza as the new pope, John Paul II, addressed his parishioners gathered in that spot and all those viewing and listening around the world. Do not be afraid. What, precisely, did John Paul call upon Christians not to fear? Primarily, it seems, not to fear to “name” themselves before the world. Martin Luther, too, had called upon Christians to name themselves boldly before a world given over, largely, to the devil. Christians were set apart, somehow: defined by being called by and, in turn, calling themselves by the name of their Lord. Christians were called to obedience, to faithfulness. They were called to profess as well as to confess. And all this was to be done boldly: Here *we* stand; we cannot do otherwise. God help us, one and all.

Over the centuries Christian leaders and witnesses have enjoined us to proclaim boldly. Great Christian intellectuals insisted we could and must serve God through the “tangle of our minds,” in the words the playwright, Sir Robert Bolt, puts into the mouth of St. Thomas More in his play *A Man for All Seasons*. Those who taught and served also nurtured and nourished the church and her children. If the early martyrs gave the most harrowing witness to the faith, subsequent laborers

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in the vineyard added to the richness and sturdiness of a tradition. But they could do so only through openhearted embrace of their faith. This embrace meant, by definition, that one was called to evangelize, to spread the good news of Jesus Christ crucified and risen. One evangelized through word and deed, through prayer and contemplation, through generous acceptance of life's turmoil and joyful affirmation of life's goodness. Always, of course, through the lens of faithfulness and obedience. The Christian was one who was humble enough to obey and sturdy enough to testify to the truth of the gospel. Christian witness lay in resisting the pridefulness that would make us sovereign in all things, whether of mind, body, or spirit.

A mere half century ago, great Christian intellectuals and teachers wrote books embraced by millions. They served "wittily, in the tangle of their minds." The story told by C. S. Lewis, for example, of "mere Christianity" was a story of faithfulness and obedience that, rather than leading to a cringing sort of self-abnegation, freed the mind, indeed, the very self, for largeheartedness. One could be "surprised by joy." Lewis wrote quite unabashedly in order to evangelize. After all, faithfulness demanded that one be obedient to the Lord's call to spread the gospel to all peoples and all nations, to go forth and not to hunker down, to fear not the judgments of others.

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Along the way, I fear, we have become fearful. Christians who are somehow "too Christian" embarrass us. It is surely a dominant view in the American academy that committed faith and the life of the mind are on a collision course, and putting the two together constitutes something of an oxymoron. We know this story, of course. It is a story that emerged from the so-called "secularization hypotheses" that held sway for a century or more and that declared confidently that religion was slated for disappearance as human beings grew more enlightened. They would not need the "crutch" of faith.

Even our seminaries and divinity schools took on a different cast. Painting in broad strokes, one might say that profession—in the sense of a called vocation to profess faith—was diminished. Evangelization fell under a cloud of suspicion. What triumphed, instead, was confession absent obedience or profession. The many sins and shortcomings of Christians over the centuries became a nigh obsessive focus. The need to confess, of course, is always present to us. The church had and has much to answer for. But confession wrenched from a context of faithfulness to God's call and the doctrines or professions of faith too easily transmogrifies into that exercise Nietzsche called "ressentiment." That is, one turns a perceived loss of power and authority into a virtue of the weak and the abject. One identifies

always with weakness, not strength; with penury, not plenty. And the last thing one would want to do, given the overwhelming burden of guilt each and every Christian was required to bear, is to evangelize. Instead, one must ask the world's forgiveness and never assume, with any confidence, that the good news remained good and that the call to evangelize was never repealed.

This is a very complicated story, to be sure. I will focus on two strands of this story in my first lecture. The first strand concerns a fundamental misunderstanding of what religious toleration and pluralism demand of believers. Simply put, the mistaken view is to assume that that robust evangelism, the urge to proselytize, is incompatible with religious toleration. The second strand draws upon Pope John Paul II and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in order to lay out a set of claims that those who identify themselves as Christian intellectuals should affirm boldly and to insist that this can be done in a way that promotes rather than negates genuine ecumenism and serious dialogue with those of other faiths or none at all. The two strands are related in ways that will become clearer as I proceed.

TOLERATION OR PROSELYTIZING?

Proselytization takes place when I knowingly set out to change someone else's mind about something basic, like religious belief. *Toleration* requires that I learn to live with deep differences even though I may disagree profoundly with another's beliefs and way of being. Let's consider the political ethic of toleration that we, as children of the West, have inherited. Persons oriented to this ethic learn to live and let live, if not approve of, deep commitments different from their own. Being formed in this framework means being taught that, if one is part of the majority religious or political orientation, or ethnic group, or race, one must imagine what it would be like to be part of, or belong to, a minority. This, in turn, spurs appreciation of the need for a regime of toleration.

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If in the majority now, one might find oneself in a minority position one day. Because persons are, to a greater or lesser extent, held to be self-interested, many argue that prudence alone suffices to buttress a regime of toleration. The Golden Rule is likely evoked here, or a secular variant of it. In its classical form, the regime of toleration did not require suspending judgment as between contrasting beliefs, identities, and ways of being; rather, it required not coercing those whose orientations one might find unintelligible, even distasteful, so long as these orientations posed no threat to public safety, nor undermined the overarching orienting framework of toleration itself.

The standard version of the story of toleration holds that liberal toleration saved religion from its own excesses and absolutist demands. By forcing a regime of toleration on religion, liberalism in its constitutional forms demanded that religion act more tolerantly. And so it came to pass that both “sectarian” groups (meaning religious bodies, of course) and nonsectarian groups (all others organized along the lines of the liberal mandate) would learn to live happily or, if not that, at least peacefully with and among one another. This truce is represented as a fragile one by contemporary civil libertarians and the most ardent secularists. If religion threatens to get out of hand, it must be beaten back. Often the Spanish Inquisition is trotted out in argument, as if this were a serious historic possibility in the Christian community in twenty-first-century Western societies.

If one traces the beginning of liberal toleration from John Locke’s classic *Letter Concerning Toleration*, one discovers that in order for religion to be tolerated it must be privatized. There is a realm of private soul-craft and a realm of public statecraft, and never the twain shall meet. In the religious domain, one is obedient to God’s call. In the civic realm, God does not figure directly. One’s fidelity is pledged to what Locke calls the magistracy. Should the magistracy egregiously overstep its bounds, there is always the “appeal to heaven” and the possibility of revolution. All religions—save atheism and Roman Catholicism—are to be tolerated. So religion is irrelevant to statecraft and is privatized. Over time, this privatization took on the hues of subjectivism. Religion came increasingly to refer to the subjective spiritual well-being of the one rather than the profession of faith of the many.

In other words, that which was privatized in relation to public life over time became subjectivized and reducible to the private experience of one. This undermines any robustness to the notion of a community of faith and a form of membership that exerts strong claims on its members. It follows that the prior privatization of religion feeds into the bad odor currently surrounding any hint of evangelization or proselytization, especially among Christian intellectuals. Proselytizing seems at best bad manners; at its worst, a way to try to force something on me that I do not want, am not interested in, but may be gulled or intimidated into accepting. A general animus against proselytizing flows from a conviction that those driven in that direction will, almost invariably, be persons of overly strong religious conviction. So, in the name of maintaining a regime of toleration, we must not tolerate unrestrained proselytization.

As if this weren’t enough for the Christian to mull over, let’s add a more recent trend to the mix. I have in mind the attack on the very notion of tolerance and toleration emanating from a postmodern direction. I’m sure you are familiar with the argument: toleration was always a sham, a cover story for hegemony. It follows that what self-professed pagans or militant atheists or others want is not toleration but equal normative acceptance that puts boundaries around each identity. A regime of undifferentiated acceptance will be attained only when society refuses to

make any normative distinctions between and among any and all comprehensive understandings of what makes a life good or worthy, or a belief true.

So, even as the regime of toleration, over time, invited deep suspicion of evangelization, toleration itself is now under assault as inadequate. This still leaves open the matter of just how tolerant of pluralism the defenders of toleration are—but we cannot settle that matter here. Suffice it to say that authentic toleration is based on recognition of deep, not superficial differences. Those who see toleration as a puny thing, best exposed as bogus and done away with, construe any attempt to evangelize in negative terms because this is, by definition, an assault on someone else's identity. The issue of toleration and the complexities of proselytization have been heavily psychologized. Whatever makes somebody else "uncomfortable" is to be eschewed. Of course, any strong articulation of a powerful religious or political position is going to make somebody somewhere uncomfortable. But we have become so uncomfortable at the thought of all this, we simply acquiesce in the view that nobody has the right to "interfere" with anyone else's identity, and evangelization bodes to do just that.

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Let's unpack this issue a bit further. Somewhere along the line—certainly in the last thirty years or so—a view of power took hold that disdains distinctions among coercion, manipulation, and persuasion. If I change my mind about something after an encounter with you, or after having spent some time in your religious community, say, the presupposition is that I have been messed with: gulled or brainwashed or taken for the proverbial walk down the primrose path. In instances of intimidation there is an implied threat of harm unless you convert to my point of view. In instances of manipulation, I sneakily get you on my side. Neither of these views respects you as a moral agent who can freely weigh alternatives and make up his or her own mind. Persuasion, by contrast, begins with the presupposition that you are a moral agent, a being whose dignity no one is permitted to deny or to strip from you and, from that stance of mutual respect, one offers arguments, or invites your participation, your sharing in a community of faith. You do not lose something by agreeing. Despite this, among persons religious, proselytizing has come to have the unpleasant ring to it we associate with coercion or manipulation. Persuasion simply gets folded into the other two as if there is no significant distinction between these three quite different alternatives.

PROSELYTIZING AND DEEP TOLERATION

Is there any way to redeem both toleration and proselytizing as organizing notions? Can we relearn how not to be afraid of the one—proselytizing—because we fear it undermines the other—toleration? I believe we can. My example of redeeming both toleration and proselytization comes from Pope John Paul II's pastoral visit to Kazakstan in September, 2001. Something struck me in a report I read of that visit in which the pontiff, in his greeting to "Dear Young People!" on September 23, 2001, in the capital city, Astana, said:

Allow me to profess before you with humility and pride the faith of Christians: Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God made man two thousand years ago, came to reveal to us this truth through his person and his teaching. Only in the encounter with him, the Word made flesh, do we find the fullness of self-realization and happiness. Religion itself, without the experience of the wonderful discovery of the Son of God and communion with him who became our brother, becomes a mere set of principles which are increasingly difficult to understand, and rules which are increasingly hard to accept.

I found this moving and I want briefly to explore why. Certainly the combination of pride and humility is a part of it. One places before another, in all humility, one's most profound beliefs, beliefs one holds with pride—not boastful self-pride but with dignity—knowing that these beliefs may well be repudiated or ignored. Also powerful is John Paul's recognition—one he shares with Bonhoeffer—that turning God into a metaphysical first principle is not only "increasingly difficult to understand" but "increasingly hard to accept." Here there is a fascinating dimension to his words to Kazak young people, for he is also proselytizing to those who are already Christians, reminding them of what their profession is all about.

John Paul's words on this pastoral visit constituted an eloquent defense of toleration in another of his homilies in Kazakstan:

When in a society citizens accept one another [notice that what is being accepted is one another as citizens, in one's civic status] in their respective religious beliefs, it is easier to foster among them the effective recognition of other human rights and an understanding of the values on which a peaceful and productive coexistence is based. In fact, they feel a common bond in the awareness that they are brothers and sisters because they are children of the one God.

This is a reference to toleration among believers—all believers. John Paul reminded his listeners that there are "citizens belonging to over 100 nationalities and ethnic groups" and they live—they have no choice but to live—side by side. But "bridges of solidarity and cooperation with other peoples, nations and cultures" is an immanent possibility that should be realized even as the gospel in all its fullness is preached "in all humility and pride." Toleration rightly understood permits more robust ties of civic sisterhood and brotherhood to grow and to flourish, especially between and among religious believers. But toleration also permits more dis-

tance when I simply cannot affirm your life choices and comprehensive views and I need not validate them at all. In fact, toleration requires that I may loathe them and argue against them. But unless you threaten the civic order in a central way, I am not permitted to deny you your free exercise.

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Let’s call this a position of *deep toleration* whose starting point is an insistence on the dialogical character of human life. Deep toleration does not require privatizing our deepest convictions. The dialogic nature of selves and communities means one always remains open to the possibility of proselytizing and being proselytized. A dialogic community in which deep differences become occasions for contestation, with the ever present possibility of persuasion, is pluralistic without being fragmented. So, to repeat, do not be afraid to evangelize, to affirm, to profess as well as confess. This makes toleration as deep toleration possible. If we privatize all our deepest convictions it is difficult to know what toleration finally means.

What Bonhoeffer brings to this discussion is a sharp awareness of obedience and profession and an insistence that the church must be in and of the world. We are obedient to God’s command—which is always concrete, never abstract. Christ is at the center of human life in the penultimate—where we live before the end-time—not cast off to the periphery, not privatized. Bonhoeffer was enthusiastic about private confession—something he learned from Catholicism. Critical Christian self-understanding should be honest, forthright, not masochistic and self-lacerating. And confession must always be connected to a concrete call to action. Bonhoeffer’s profound christocentrism is not an invitation to ethnocentrism or parochialism but precisely a way to break through rigidities and political ideologies. Christ’s call is total and exclusive, and yet all are welcomed into the kingdom.

Jesus as the man-for-others is the form to which we should conform and, if we do, we will not be among the “tyrannical despisers of men” who “exploit the baseness of the human heart.” Instead, we are called to concrete responsibility, especially, in his circumstance, toward the Jewish people, the “bleeding brothers and sisters” of Jesus Christ. Obedience demands this sort of faithfulness. Jesus certainly is “no apologist” for the “successful men in history, but neither does He head the insurrection of the shipwrecked existences against their successful rivals.” “Ethics as formation,” he writes, “means the bold endeavor to speak about the way in which the form of Jesus Christ takes form in our world, in a manner which is neither abstract nor casuistic, neither programmatic nor purely speculative. Concrete judgments and decisions will have to be ventured here. Decision and action can

here no longer be delegated to the personal conscience of the individual. Here there are concrete commandments and instructions for which obedience is demanded.”

Do not be afraid. And what of evangelization? Are we called to call others? Yes, surely, but with a delicacy and reticence that does not shame others; does not exploit their moments of weakness and despair. In his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer tells Eberhard Bethge that he would never use the occasion of a bombing raid and the subsequent collapse into hysteria and terror of many in the Tegel Prison, in which he and they were held, as an opening wedge into evangelization or confession. No, we must speak to people in their strengths, not in moments of shame. He does not add this, but we, of course, must observe that Bonhoeffer himself is strong in this way. He insists that Christianity must champion human dignity and reserve. That dignity and reserve, I submit to you, as I conclude this first lecture, is best served by those who reject the privatization and psychologization of Christianity; who embrace the fullness of life; who shun rigid moralizing; and who recognize that in the Trinity itself, the form of unity and diversity, Christian life and belief “confronts us in its entirety...Christian life is participation in the encounter of Christ with the world.” ⊕

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