

# FALSE ECUMENISM

The Catholic Church is committed to strong interreligious relations, as well it should be. Being respectful of other religions is a good thing, and it very often leads to crucial coalitions on timely political, economic, social and cultural matters. There is a difference, however, between respecting other religions and fawning over them.

Surely we want children to learn about the history and beliefs of the world religions, but do we really want them to celebrate their holidays? As a general rule, the answer should be no. Exceptions can be made when a religious holiday of one faith can be celebrated as a cultural holiday by another faith, Christmas being the obvious example. But the more religious the content of the holiday, the less it should be observed by members of another faith. That is why it would be just plain stupid for Jews to commemorate Good Friday. And none do. It would be just as stupid for Christians to commemorate Yom Kippur. But some do.

“As I do every Monday morning when I teach at Georgetown University,” writes liberal Catholic columnist E.J. Dionne, “I pulled off Canal Road into the main parking garage. Normally, I glide right into the lot, but on this morning, 15 or 20 cars were backed up waiting to get in.”

The *Washington Post* writer soon found out it was Yom Kippur.

“Now consider that Georgetown is a Catholic and a Jesuit university—proudly so—and then consider that the campus hosts one of the day’s largest services for the holy day in the city of Washington.” Dionne was ecstatic. He quickly added that Georgetown is so ecumenical, it even has a Muslim chaplain. He did not say whether there are Muslim footbaths at the rear of the church.

Yom Kippur is not a cultural holiday for Jews—it is strictly

religious. Indeed, the Day of Atonement is typically spent by observant Jews in synagogue, asking God for forgiveness. So why are Catholics sponsoring it? Is it really a demonstration of goodwill, or is it emblematic of a loss of confidence in Catholicism? Let's put it this way: either Roman Catholicism is special, or it is not. If it is, then attempts to relativize its status must be resisted. If it is not, then why bother to observe it?

Recently, I was interviewed by Alan Colmes on his Fox News radio program about *Secular Sabotage*. At one point, he asked me something I have never been asked before on a live radio or TV show: Do I believe that my religion is better than his? Alan, who is Jewish and is married to a Catholic, is a great guy and his question was not born of sarcasm or malice. He was startled when I said, "Of course." He then asked if my religion was better than all other religions. To which I quickly added, "Of course it is." I hastened to add that I was not implying that he was a bad person, or was destined to land in Hell. I simply said that my religion is the one, true religion. We ended the exchange as friendly as we began, and the respect was mutual.

I've seen what happens when students are taught that all religions are essentially the same: the religion textbooks that my elementary school students used in the 1970s were so thoroughly ecumenical that it made the slide from Catholicism to another religion—or none at all—so easy as to be disturbing. If all we stand for is the Golden Rule, then, yes, all religions (as well as atheist associations) are equal. But if there is more to it than that, then it is high time we said so. This is not a call to religious chauvinism, but it is a call to stop with the religious correctness that colors ecumenical conversations.

Five years ago, Rabbi Joseph Potasnik and I signed a joint statement slamming Chrismukkah, the contrived holiday established to make Christians and Jews feel good about not

celebrating their own holiday exclusively. "Chanukah and Christmas celebrated during the same period should not be fused into some cultural combination that does not recognize the spiritual identity of our respective faiths," we said.

What Rabbi Potasnik and I have forged over the years is true ecumenism: we both deeply believe in our respective religions, and we deeply respect each other's religion, but neither is willing to dilute his religion by giving his blessings to a false merger.

Is Dionne accurate when he says Georgetown is "proudly" Catholic? This is the same school that put a drape over the name of Jesus when asked to do so by the Obama administration. This is the same school that recognizes a pro-abortion club on campus, "Hoyas for Choice." This is the same school where faculty members erupted in protest when an African cardinal spoke disapprovingly about homosexuality at a graduation ceremony. In other words, is Georgetown's recognition of Yom Kippur a sign ecumenism, or exhaustion?

Ironically, I am glad Georgetown employs a Muslim chaplain, but not for the reasons Dionne likes: it took the Muslim chaplain—not a Jesuit one—to take public issue with the planned removal of crucifixes from the classroom in 2004. That's the kind of ecumenical presence I can readily endorse.