

THE LIMITS OF ECUMENISM

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After President Clinton took Communion at a South African Roman Catholic church, a well-known journalist, himself not a Catholic, defended the president by saying that what he did was an example of ecumenism. He further held that the Catholic Church should be more inclusive, maintaining that it made good sense to welcome people from other religions to receive the Eucharist at Mass. Unfortunately, this kind of thinking—confusing ecumenism for inclusiveness—is commonplace.

To be ecumenical is to promote greater understanding and cooperation between one religion and another; it is not to collapse the teachings of one religion to fit harmoniously with the strictures of another. True ecumenism respects differences and does not seek to dump all beliefs and teachings into a high speed theological blender. If that were done, the result would be mush.

Respecting differences, especially religious differences, isn't very difficult for those who are on sure footing with their own. The obverse is also true: it is much harder to respect the tenets of another religion when standing on slippery grounds. The natural corrective is not to soften the grounds of others but to strengthen one's own.

Those who clamor for greater inclusion run up against some pretty elementary sociological laws. All groups, beginning with the family, are based on exclusion. That's what makes every family so special: parents, children and other blood relatives hold a non-transferable status that constitutes their special relationship. People do not decide to check into a family the way they do a hotel, nor are they empowered to invite their friends to join.

With religion, it's admittedly somewhat different. All

religions are based on a set of beliefs about the supernatural, beliefs that are subject to change. It is entirely possible to change those beliefs, but it is not possible to make them so inclusive that they embrace everything and anything. If that were to happen, the tent of inclusiveness would collapse of its own weight.

To put it another way, attempts to maximize inclusiveness are bought at the expense of real community. True, meaningful communities are always micro in nature, never macro. That is why it is positively fatuous to believe that there is such a thing as a global community: if it's global in size, it can't be a community (except in the mind of a professor, of course, where all things are possible).

There is also something dishonest about contemporary appeals to inclusiveness. For example, we often hear that the Boy Scouts should be more inclusive, that they should include girls, the godless and gays. Now if this were to happen, it would mean the end of the Boy Scouts, and this explains why those who hate the Scouts continue to advance their claims.

Meanwhile, no one would demand that gay clubs on campus include heterosexuals or that black dorms allow whites to join. Indeed, even radical feminists don't complain that the Olympics are inherently sexist—though they are, according to their terms—because to do so would be to call for one, open and all-inclusive event; if that were to happen, the results would be obvious.

Teenagers looking for trouble like to “crash” parties. Similarly, ideologues looking for trouble like to crash communities; they do so by invoking the politics of inclusiveness. Instead of respecting diversity, they seek to crush it, and they do so by crashing the walls of those communities they wish to change. This is intolerance, pure and simple.

In the end, there is nothing ecumenical about partaking in the sacraments of another religion, rather it is opportunistic and exploitative. Ed Koch, the former mayor of New York, has attended countless Masses, yet it would never occur to him to receive Communion. Koch, who is Jewish, has too much respect for Catholicism to do such a thing.

Religions that reflexively stretch their contours to include outsiders risk losing their insiders. To be Catholic is to have an identity, just as to be Jewish is to have an identity. That Catholics cannot be bar mitzvahed is only just. Let the princes of inclusiveness call it discrimination, or scream "victim." Any religion that doesn't protect its borders risks losing its center.

Ecumenism, like anything other value, is capable of being corrupted. At its best, it is a call for mutual respect and understanding. At its worst, it is a call for surrender. What matters is whether we want pudding or jello. Make mine pudding, and I'll take it to go. With my friends, of course.