

I am Happy We Are Not a Christian Nation

By Barrington H. Brennen , May 11, 2011

We boast of being a Christian nation, but are we really so? According to the latest national statistics, we are a nation where most of the population claims to be Christian or attends a Christian church at least once a month. Does church attendance make The Bahamas a Christian nation? I am happy to live in a nation where most of the population claims to be Christian. However, I am even happier that by constitution The Bahamas do not require its residents to be Christians. On the other hand, the Constitution guarantees the right and freedom of each individual residing in The Bahamas to live according to his or her conscience. In other words, The Bahamas is a secular state and not a Christian one.

According to the International Religious Freedom Report 2010, “More than 90 percent of the population professes a religion, and anecdotal evidence suggests most attend services regularly. The country's religious profile reflects its diversity. Protestant Christian denominations including Baptists (35 percent), Anglicans (15 percent), Pentecostals (8 percent), Church of God (5 percent), Seventh-day Adventists (5 percent), and Methodists (4 percent) are in the majority, but there are also significant Roman Catholic (14 percent) and Greek Orthodox populations. Smaller Jewish, Baha'i, Jehovah's Witnesses, Rastafarian, and Muslim communities also are active. A small number of Bahamians and Haitians, particularly those living in the Family Islands, practice Obeah, a version of voodoo. Some members of the small resident Guyanese and Indian populations practice Hinduism and other South Asian religions. Although many unaffiliated Protestant congregations are almost exclusively black, most mainstream churches are integrated racially.”

WHY A SECULAR STATE?

According to the dictionary, “A secular state is a concept of secularism, whereby a state or country purports to be officially neutral in matters of religion, supporting neither religion nor irreligion. A secular state also claims to treat all its citizens equally regardless of religion, and claims to avoid preferential treatment for a citizen from a particular religion/non-religion over other religions/non-religion. Secular states do not have a state religion or equivalent, although the absence of a state religion does not guarantee that a state is secular.” If by constitution The Bahamas were Christian, then there would be policies and laws in place dictating the way each citizen should live, thus restricting freedom of religion and speech. This is the case in the Islamic states today where each citizen is required to abide by Islamic beliefs or face a penalty.

In 1620 one hundred Puritans boarded the ‘Mayflower’ bound for the New World. The Pilgrim Fathers, as they are called today left England because they did not have religious freedom. They wanted a place where the state would not interfere with their freedom to believe and practice their faith. They wanted a secular country by constitution where the people could live their conscience under God. They wanted to be loyal citizens yet not controlled by the state in their religious beliefs and practices. This freedom included the right to meet for instruction and worship, to worship on any day of the week they chose and to worship their God the way they wanted to. It also included the freedom to change one’s religion as well as to invite others to do so. The truth is Christians can thrive better in a secular state because God does not force anyone to worship Him.

A challenge we are facing in The Bahamas is that many are preaching the gospel, but few are living it. We have countless Christian churches but not enough Christian people. Thus we have too many hypocrites who want to obliterate certain social ills, but their own lives condemn them.

PERSONAL CENSUS

Today, many Christians who are fed up with the social ills in society are being misled to think that the government must provide some spiritual guidance for the people. They are also saying that since we profess to be a 'Christian nation,' we should have no alcohol saloons, illegal drugs, strip joints, pornography channels, dance halls, etc. While I do wish these were not in our country, the real problem is not the presence of these things but the inability for Christian leaders to promote godly Christian living, and to teach personal censorship instead of national censorship. Too many preachers are themselves engaged in shady lifestyles, social impropriety, and religious and political gerrymandering. Too many community leaders who claim to be Christian are accomplices in crime and shady business.

We are too pre-occupied with the discussion of whether or not we are or should be a Christian nation. That is not my concern. I am more concerned that the people live Godly lives and that true Christians accept that all have a right to choose how they will live, what they will watch on TV, the music they will listen to and places they will go. That is the freedom we are guaranteed by our constitution. What Christians must do then is to stop condemning and start modeling godly living. The true Christian will teach religious tolerance and the acceptance that we are a pluralistic society. That means every one respects every one of all Christian faiths and other faiths such as Islam, Baha'i, Christian Science, Rastafarianism, atheism, agnosticism, etc.

Sometimes politicians and religious leaders argue about whether or not shops should be open on Sundays. Religious leaders say the Sunday is a holy day of worship. Politicians say it is a good day for business. The truth is, in a secular society, every day should be a shopping day. The people are the ones to decide whether or not they will shop or not on a certain day. Having stores closed on Sunday is no proof that we are a Christian nation. It is the way we live that determines how powerful and effective Christianity is in influencing the society. Christians, while we might preach against gambling or strip joints, perhaps we need to preach more to the people who are doing these things. Our primary emphasis then will not be to close down the gambling hall and nude saloons, but to teach those who seek to go there how to live godly lives. They have the freedom to choose how to live and Christians have the freedom to preach and live the gospel. Note that our first duty is to live the gospel, not preach it. One writer puts it this way "Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words."

Religious freedom is all about being able to decide how you want to live and not having the state dictate to you. I am truly happy The Bahamas is not a Christian nation. Let's keep it that way.