Part 1: Religious Tribalism - Pros and Cons

Religious groups in North America often behave like tribes, Baptists in particular. It’s part of the unintended results of religious freedom. It can be both useful and destructive.

A tribe is a type of kinship group that shares a common ancestor, cultural experience or some other kind of affinity. Basically, it’s a group that has something in common. Tribes occupy a particular territory, they are led by chieftains, and they live by codes of ethics that can be enforced within the tribe. Tribes can exhibit internal hierarchies or social ranks.

Cultural anthropologists observe that the benefits of behaving like a tribe are solidarity, enforcement and succession. A tribe has a clear sense of its members, can identify wrong behaviors that might threaten the tribe and provides for ongoing leadership from within its own ranks that perpetuates the tribe. The achievement of an ethical code can be an enduring contribution of a tribe.

Tribalism, however, also poses several challenges. Competition, exclusion, shunning, discrimination, elitism and the possibilities of either ethnocentrism or racism are all noticeable results of bad tribalistic behavior. Morality (the acceptable conduct of a group), in contrast with ethics, can follow destructive patterns, such as discrimination on the basis of gender, race, status or place of birth.

One study of tribalist behavior found that tribalizers relish confrontation and think of persons outside the tribe as the enemy. Tribalizers do not compromise and tend to think their position is the only way. Sometimes tribalizers are aggressive, but more often they are subtle and covert. Everything is cast in a win/lose scenario, and a basic tactic can be to withhold prerogatives or to engage in passive-aggressive behavior.

Christian tribalism is nothing new. More than a century ago, scholars showed how various defined communities in the early Christian world were differentiated by culture. While each region shared a common understanding of “Jesus Christ, Savior and Lord,” they differed on matters of sub-beliefs and practices.
For example, around the Palestinian communities, Christianity tended to hold on to its Jewishness. Roman Christianity was characterized by its emphasis upon forms and polity; Egyptian Christianity had an interest in learning and speculative theories, and North African Christians are often remembered for their rigorous ethics.

The Reformation perpetuated this tribal tendency. What we now call “denominations” coalesced around language groups, nation-states and statements of theological consensus. The chieftains of the Reformation became arch-heroes of the tribes: Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and King Henry VIII.

In the 500 years since the Reformation, even more tribes came together in the religious space of Britain and North America: Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists, Disciples of Christ, Unitarian/Universalists, Pentecostals and so on. The English Act of Toleration and the U.S. Constitution validated the tribal reality and even turned older communions, like Catholics and Orthodox, into tribes.

Tribalism may be a logical result of a voluntary society, but it poses some serious theological and ethical concerns. Recall Jesus’ words in his intercessory prayer: “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one” (John 17:11b). In light of this prayer, the famous ethicist, H. Richard Niebuhr, actually declared denominationalism [tribalism] the great sin of the Christian churches.

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