

**Does Canada's "National" Religion
Lead us to God? ~ Amos 7:1-17**

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October 22, 2017

Have you ever been asked a strange question by someone about life in Canada? Often these questions arise because people lack knowledge about life here. Someone collected questions Canadians get asked. How would you respond to them?

1 – I have a friend living in Canada. He lives in Toronto. Do you know Dave Smith from Toronto?

2 – When I insert my American bank card in the ATM, why does it give me Canadian money?

3 – What time do they turn on the Northern Lights?

4 – Where can I buy some totem pole seeds?

5 - In Banff National Park, where is the park?

6 – How do you guys keep your teeth? I hear the cold snaps them off.

7 – Where do you live during the winter?

8 – If the sign says 100 kilometers, how far is it really?

9 – How come you don't say "eh" after every sentence?

10 – How do you keep the glaciers white during the summer? Do you have to paint them? The Canadian who was asked that questions answered. "Yes, yes we do. It's called job creation and it keeps many employed throughout the summer months."

But I have a question today about Canada that might be a little more difficult to answer. It concerns religion. Some countries have an official state religion. England has the Church of England. Saudi Arabia declares Sunni Islam as the kingdom's religion. Thailand declares Buddhism as its state religion. Israel defines itself as the democratic Jewish state. Argentina recognizes Roman Catholicism as the state religion.

So what is the state religion of Canada? But you might know that Canada doesn't actually have a state religion. Our Charter of Rights and Freedoms declares that one of our fundamental freedoms is the freedom of conscience and religion. But I believe there is a religion or worldview that is becoming dominant across Canada. You can find believers of it among those who would call themselves Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and Atheists. I would argue that many non-religious people also practice this religion. Many people you know follow this religion. Maybe some of

you are believers of this religion here today. I think it is the dominant belief system in politics, media, education, law and even some churches. So what is it?

So **what is Canada's "national" religion? Pluralism.** What is Pluralism? **It is an acceptance that two or more worldviews with mutually exclusive truth claims are equally valid.** It believes that exclusive claims of different religions turn out to be variations of the same universal truths. So that means Christians, Muslims, First Nations, Atheists and others can practice their own faith yet affirm another's faith as equally true if they're pluralists.

Now why am I bringing this to our attention? Pluralism in Canada today resembles the religious practices and beliefs of the ancient Israelites during the time of Amos. They worshipped the Lord and the golden calves at their alternative worship centers. Their pluralism differed in that they worshipped idols. Religious Pluralism today trades physical idols for ideological ones.

If we're not aware of this, we can unwittingly adopt pluralistic beliefs. We can go against the first of the 10 commandments reproduced on the front page of your bulletin – "You shall have no other gods before me." Our worship and lives can begin to look like the mess Amos confronted.

Today I want to help us understand religious pluralism so we can recognize it in our own lives or the lives of others. 1 – What does pluralism teach? What challenges question its legitimacy? 2 – How does God respond to Israel's religious pluralism? 3– How do we ensure our worship stays God-pleasing in a pluralistic believing country?

Question 1 - What does pluralism teach or believe? What challenges does this teaching face? This material comes from an article entitled "The Questions of Pluralism" by Ravi Zacharias and Vince Vitale. It is an excerpt from their book "Jesus among secular gods." You can read the entire article by searching with those key words at the bottom of the bulletin. **So what does modern day pluralism believe?**

1 - Equal Claims – The major worldviews fundamentally agree. This is a really popular belief. You hold your beliefs. And the next person can have theirs. But we don't really have to be concerned about different belief because they say basically the same thing – Love and do good to others.

But though similar on the surface, worldviews are fundamentally different. They actually disagree in major ways. Christianity says it is the only way to God. Islam says it is the only way to God. So how can those agree? Do all

worldviews agree on where we are headed and how we get there? So this claim doesn't really take the different worldviews that seriously it seems to me.

Secondly, pluralism says all religious views are **Equally Rational because Faith is Blind**. So you can believe and trust in whatever because blind faith means you turn away from evidence and reason. That's why people are okay with a belief in the Christian God or Islam or the tooth fairy because they all fall into the category of unreasonable faith.

But Christianity rests on evidence and reasoning. Yes there is faith involved. But if Jesus did not rise from the dead in history, the Bible says our faith is in vain. If someone can produce Jesus' body or DNA evidence that he stayed in the grave, Christianity is done. So to equate all faiths as irrational is inaccurate.

Third, pluralism can argue that all worldviews basically have **Equal Impact – The practical payoff is the same. Believe in something that gives you peace.** Vitale, one of the authors tells of a time he debated an atheist who argued that there is really no difference between an atheist and a Christian funeral. Everyone's devastated so it's the same payoff. But is that accurate?

But will it give peace when facing a crippling illness or death? I think many people in this room have experienced Christian funerals where the overall mood is not devastation. It's a kind of bittersweet joy. A Christian facing death has a decidedly different outlook and hope compared to the atheist in that moment.

Fourth, Pluralism argues for the **Equal Value of persons** which is a very good desire. But pluralism makes an incorrect application of this desire. **Don't make a truth claim that will lead to disagreement.** If you want to preserve the equal value of persons, you must equally value their viewpoints and beliefs. If one person claims to have truth that devalues the other person's view. That can lead to disrespect, intolerance and maybe even violence.

But we can learn to disagree while maintaining respect. Does disagreeing with someone automatically mean we're devaluing them? Today's public disagreements seem to say so. When is the last time you've watched or listened to a respectful debate or disagreement that didn't involve personal attacks, insults or sarcastic put downs? Jesus commanded Christians to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute. And disagreement will not go away – the problem is not disagreement but that we have lost the ability to disagree well.

Fifth, pluralism says everyone should have **Equal Opportunity to access and evaluate truth.** That's another good desire for fairness. It speaks for those who may have never heard say the Gospel. It argues that it's not fair for

people to die without hearing the Gospel and then be sentenced to Hell. Therefore, if we affirm every worldview as equally valid, that problem is solved.

But is it? The question of those who have never heard of Christ is a legitimate concern that has bothered many. We might defend this charge by noting that God is a seeking God who has revealed Himself as one looking for those who desire to come to Him. We don't know what happens between God and people who have never heard.

But the challenge for the pluralist is **does the belief system of pluralism actually give an equal opportunity for everyone to discover the "truth?"** What about people who believe their religion is the only way? They have never had an opportunity to be exposed to pluralism. Is pluralism as inclusive as it claims or does it exclude those who have never heard of pluralism?

And lastly, I think one of the greatest motivators for pluralism is a desire to be **Equally united with others with whom you can be yourself around without being judged.** People long for unity with other people. They are sick of tension. We long for community with friends who are absolutely loyal and with whom you can be yourself without judgment or controversy.

But does avoiding healthy disagreement lead to unity or an appearance of unity? Merely avoiding disagreement and refusing to acknowledge differences may lead only to a façade. We can jump from belief to belief depending on whom we are with. We are willing to temporarily unite ourselves with many different truth claims so long as they keep relationships easy and fun. But is that really deep & loyal unity?

Such an appearance of unity happened at the end of World War 2. The Soviet Union and the western forces of the allies united in their fight against Nazi Germany. But within weeks, maybe even days of the end of the war, the tension between the two bubbled over. Here were two groups with dramatically different ideologies – Communism and Democracy. The image of unity was shattered because there were so many differences beneath the surface.

Jesus came so we could experience a deep unity based not on pushing down disagreements but working through them in the Spirit of Christ. If we want strong relationships, we need loyalty, commitment and consistency not the shaky ground of a unity based on the suppression of disagreement or divergent views.

Yet modern pluralism appeals to many people because it at first seems more tolerant, easier and loving. But though initially appealing, I think it fails to stand up to careful investigation and honest disagreement. It may not

provide depth of relationships people are looking for. Yet Jesus came to provide such community. He is the bridge that brings people from every culture and nation into a unity under Him.

With that very brief and basic understanding of modern pluralism in mind, let's see how God responded to Israelite pluralism. That's where Amos comes in. Let's start with Amos 7:1-9

Amos 7 (ESV)

7 This is what the Lord GOD showed me: behold, he was forming locusts when the latter growth was just beginning to sprout, and behold, it was the latter growth after the king's mowings. ²When they had finished eating the grass of the land, I said,

"O Lord GOD, please forgive!

How can Jacob stand?

He is so small!"

³The LORD relented concerning this:

"It shall not be," said the LORD.

⁴This is what the Lord GOD showed me: behold, the Lord GOD was calling for a judgment by fire, and it devoured the great deep and was eating up the land. ⁵Then I said,

"O Lord GOD, please cease!

How can Jacob stand?

He is so small!"

⁶The LORD relented concerning this:

"This also shall not be," said the Lord GOD.

⁷This is what he showed me: behold, the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. ⁸And the LORD said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said,

"Behold, I am setting a plumb line

in the midst of my people Israel;

I will never again pass by them;

⁹the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate,

and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste,

and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword."

Here God reveals His response to the religiously plural Israelites. He does this by showing Amos 3 visions. Vision 1 is found in verses 1-3. It is the time of year when Israel's farmers were most vulnerable. The latter growth or second crop began to sprout. The king's portion of everyone's harvest had been collected. So the crop growing at this time would feed the farmer's family through dry season. If this crop failed, they would starve.

The Lord forms a swarm of locusts. They posed a great threat to farmer's crops. Locusts, like grasshoppers, could completely devour your crop. Amos sees the locusts go out and wreak devastation in the vision. It so stuns him that he cries out to the Lord in verse 2. "O Lord God, please forgive! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!"

Amos' cry reveals a lot. He recognizes the locust swarm as God's response to Israel's unfaithfulness. God intends to awaken them to their need for repentance. Amos recognizes that Israel's sin has provoked such a response. So he asks the Lord to forgive. Amos appeals for this forgiveness by God because Israel was so small.

The Lord responds in verse 3. "The Lord relented concerning this, 'It shall not be,' said the Lord." So the Lord responds to Amos' intercession. Notice He doesn't forgive but He does relent. He does show mercy.

But then the second vision comes along. Verse 4. "The Lord called for a judgment by fire, and it devoured the great deep and was eating up the land." Fire was another great threat to farmers. We saw this in southern Alberta this past week even touching my own family. The fire's intensity in Amos would dry up water just beneath the ground.

Amos again intervenes. "O Lord God, please cease! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!" This time there is no request for forgiveness. Amos simply calls on God to stop. He sees Israel for what she really is – so small compared to Almighty God. The Lord again responds. Verse 6 – The Lord relented concerning this: "This also shall not be," said the Lord God. So notice both the prophet and the Lord's heart of compassion for the people.

But then we get to a third vision where things change. Amos has asked the Lord questions in the first two visions. Now the Lord will ask Amos a question. These verses contain the famous plumb line image. A plumb line was a string with a heavy iron weight on the bottom. You held the string up against a vertical wall to see how straight it stood. So the Lord stands beside a wall holding a plumb line. He asks Amos what he sees. Amos answers "a plumb line." He doesn't disclose the plumb line's verdict. Was the wall crooked or straight?

The Lord reveals it. Verse 8 – Then the Lord said, "Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel and I will never again pass by them." So Lord's plumb line reveals a crooked wall or a crooked people. The Lord passed by this reality many times giving them opportunity to repent. But his patience ends. "I will not pass by them. I will now call them to account."

What will this accounting look like? "The high places of Isaac shall be made desolate." High places in each village served as places to worship local idols. "The sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste." The first king of Israel set

up two alternative sanctuaries at Bethel and Dan. They will be destroyed. “And I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.” Jeroboam was the first king of Israel who set up the sanctuaries. But at this time, Jeroboam the second ruled Israel. The Lord would take out his sword against Jeroboam’s dynasty. Notice the focus of the Lord’s judgment – their king – political power; their sanctuaries – the national religion and their localized religion.

How does the Lord respond to Israel’s pluralism? God confronts it and calls them to account in order to rescue some. God didn’t command loyalty because He was insecure or jealous in a petty way. He knew that a straying heart led only to death and a depravity that would ruin lives and societies. So God does not leave them to merrily go on their way. He confronts this pluralism. We get an example of this pluralism and God’s response to it in Amos 7:10-17.

¹⁰Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired against you in the midst of the house of Israel. The land is not able to bear all his words. ¹¹For thus Amos has said,

“Jeroboam shall die by the sword,
and Israel must go into exile
away from his land.”

¹²And Amaziah said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there, ¹³but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”

¹⁴Then Amos answered and said to Amaziah, “I was no prophet, nor a prophet’s son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. ¹⁵But the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel.’ ¹⁶Now therefore hear the word of the LORD.

“You say, ‘Do not prophesy against Israel,
and do not preach against the house of Isaac.’

¹⁷Therefore thus says the LORD:

“Your wife shall be a prostitute in the city,
and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword,
and your land shall be divided up with a measuring line;
you yourself shall die in an unclean land,
and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.”

Amaziah looks like the high priest of the nation at Bethel. He has connections to the king, Jeroboam of Israel. He sends a message about Amos conspiring against the king. “The land is not able to bear his words.” Or these are bad words for the nation. Then Amaziah reports the content of Amos’ message. “Jeroboam shall die by the sword and Israel must go away into exile away from the land.”

Now it's true that the Lord has just spoken through Amos that He will rise against Jeroboam with the sword. But it's not certain this means the certain death of Jeroboam by the sword. In fact, when we look back in 2nd Kings 14:23-29, it seems like this Jeroboam died a natural death. It was his house or descendants who would face this judgment and exile. But Amaziah maybe exaggerates Amos' message to make it look more personally threatening to the king.

Then in verses 12 and 13, the priest commands Amos to leave. Maybe Jeroboam the king sent back word that Amos should be banned. Or Amaziah does this on his own authority. But he utters a clear message, Get out and "never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary and it is a temple of the kingdom." Amaziah seems to think that Amos is a professional prophet. He tells Amos to leave and earn his living in Judah, his homeland. Work and eat bread there you professional prophet.

But he could no longer work at Bethel because it is the king's sanctuary – not the Lord's sanctuary. Weren't they supposed to worship the Lord? And it is a temple of the kingdom – not the Lord? So political and religious power have joined together. Bethel worship is the nation's religion. It is the king's sanctuary and it is a temple of the kingdom.

But priests were not supposed to join with kings in power sharing. They were supposed to bring God's Word to the king. Sometimes they brought encouragement. Other times they brought rebuke. Amaziah was supposed to be independent and resist being compromised by power or money. Amaziah completely failed. Instead of bringing the word of the Lord to the king, he commands the bringer of the Lord's Word to get out.

Amos then corrects Amaziah's misunderstanding. Amos was no professional prophet. He was a herdsman and perhaps an overseer of many flocks. And he dressed or clipped sycamore figs. That's another business. It looks like this guy was well looked after financially. He had no need to make bread as a prophet. God called and compelled him to deliver this difficult message.

So finally he rebukes the high priest of Bethel. You command me to be quiet and get out. Here is what will happen to you. Your wife will be forced to sell herself. Your legacy will end through the death of your sons and daughters. You will lose any land you own. And he would die in exile.

That seems pretty harsh doesn't it? But this guy was a leader in the nation. He was responsible for the nation's spiritual life. He affirmed and participated in this alternative worship at Bethel. God confronts Israel's religious pluralism and pronounces judgment upon those who practice it.

What does this have to do with our worship? It asks us to seriously examine **Who do we worship? Is it the God of the Bible or another god or worldview?** If we don't get God right before we worship, we can do a lot of worshipping of a false god.

So how do I guard against pluralism seeping into my life? Pray, ask the Lord for his help and His light to see us through the darkness. Read, reflect on and memorize the Bible. It communicates who God is; what He is like; His will for my life. It constantly corrects and reorients us to His ways. It can grow our trust of God. If you're not in God's Word, where are you getting an alternative perspective to our national religion?

Gather with other Christians to study the Bible. Talk about living the Christian life. Allow for disagreement and differing opinions. Together, discover how these can be resolved.

Gain some understanding about pluralism and how it works. A lot of people have unconsciously adopted this view. Then you might be able to better identify it in your social, work or friend circles.

Recover the blessing of respectful disagreement. Engage in respectful discussions and interactions with others about their beliefs and understandings. Don't jump on them or shut them down. Explore with them and let God's Spirit work and speak.

Together with God's help, we can slowly figure out what it looks like to be devoted followers of the one true God in a pluralistic country like Canada.