
Opinion

My Take: Christian privilege

By Bin Lim

Posted Oct 22, 2019 at 5:02 PM

I grew up in Indonesia where, more than 90 percent of the population is Muslim. Despite not being a Muslim, I don't remember experiencing marginalization. Our community officially celebrated Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist and other holiday traditions equally. I do, however, remember some rivalry between Islam and Christianity. Wherever there was a mosque, you'd see a church nearby. My perception as a teenager was that the public attitude was "live and let live."

After graduating from high school, I went to college in (West) Germany, where religion just wasn't a public issue. My observation was that most Germans seem to be "secularized" Christians. There seemed to be more friendly competition among Christian denominations, than between Christians and people of other faiths. I thought religion was largely a private matter. We mind our own business, and respect those with different beliefs.

I came to the United States in 1973. Two years later, I moved to West Michigan. Many first encounters in Holland began with, "What church do you go to?" My new neighbors were friendly, but their questions assumed that I was a Christian or someone to be converted to Christianity. This was not a welcoming introduction. My family and I were invited to churches, quite often to hear that those who don't claim Jesus as their savior will be sent to hell forever.

In a short time, I accumulated four Bibles as gifts from our friends. The claim of superiority, implicit in the desire to convert, obscured their sense of empathy and compassion. The Golden Rule seemed forgotten. When I challenged their presumptions, they reacted defensively, some claiming their First Amendment rights had been violated.

During my time in Holland, many well-meaning friends have wished that I would accept Jesus as my Savior. In order to be true to myself, I try to discern all wisdom from past and present, (religious or not) and follow my own conscience, remaining at peace with people from different traditions.

Looking back at my time as a commissioner of Holland's International Relations Commission (IRC), I remember a year the organizer of a Martin Luther King Jr. celebration wanted local support. Instead of honoring King's social justice legacy, the event morphed into a Christian celebration. Dr. King was indeed Christian, but his message transcends religion. It's worth mentioning that most of his opposition was also Christian. In that instance, I was the single vote against supporting this form of celebration. To no avail, every year the event has a very Christian focus.

Another IRC memory I have was at the Volunteer Appreciation Dinner, which no longer exists. This event always started with a Christian prayer by the mayor. My repeated requests to make the opening more inclusive of other faiths, or even just a silent moment of reflection, were always ignored. My concerns seemed to have no value, which made me feel like an outsider.

I also recall participating in another Holland event highlighting local good deeds called, "Finding Jesus in the Neighborhood." Aware of the increasingly diverse population in Holland, I suggested we change it to "Finding Compassion in the Neighborhood." As I had experienced time and time again, I didn't get a listening ear. I felt like I didn't belong, and my presence was not an important part of my neighborhood without Christianity.

Unless you are willing to make yourself vulnerable and expose yourself to others' perspectives, it is impossible to understand them. Listening and learning can take time and effort, but the time to start is now. The Holland Openly Secular Alliance (HOSA) will host a lecture and discussion about "Christian Privilege" on Tuesday, Oct. 29, at Herrick Library from 6:30-8:30 p.m. All interested in learning are welcome to attend!

— H. Bin Lim is a resident of Zeeland.