**Assignment 3:**

**Discussion regarding Essential Core**

**“Christianity’s Influence on Society”**

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PHI-815 History of the Integration of Religion & Society

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**Michael , excellent work on your essay for PHI 815-22! This is a thought-provoking essay that is a good contemporary response to the historical perspective of the PHI 815 class. I can feel your passion and frustration as a pastor with the church’s challenges in reaching a secular society.**

**Your thesis: "The Christian definition of mission needs to be broadened to include how people can have better lives through Christ; ways to cope with the realities of a non-Christian world in an educated manner; and address how Christianity and society really work well together." You created a well-stated and placed thesis statement to guide the essay at the end of the introductory paragraph.**

**At the end of a paragraph where you are discussing mainline church people's belief in hell, I noted: It seems like you are saying the definition of the gospel is affected by whether mainline church people believe in hell or not. This could be stated more clearly.**

**In your discussion of Rainer's blog where you disagree with him, I wonder, are you conflating the distinction between roots and fruits? It seems you are trying to make the point found in James 2:19-20: 19 You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! 20 But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?**

**Here a few APA tips:**

**Paper needs a Header: Michael Bowe, PHI 815-12 Integration of Religion and Society, Assignment #3 (date)**

**Publisher Place for books is not needed in APA7.**

**Double space your block quotes.**

**Book titles and article titles are to be in sentence case.**

**Journal volume #s are italicized.**

**Keep up the excellent work, Michael ! -- Prof. David Ward Grade: A**

The church has had its heyday of influence. There was a “church growth” movement in the late 60’s that extended to the 80’s. In fact, there was a moment when church was the only option on Sunday. In their book: *Resident Aliens*, Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon write of a time when a theater broke the traditional “blue laws” of the day. They write,

On that night, the last pocket of resistance to secularity in the Western world served notice that it would no longer be a prop for the church. There would be no more free passes for the church, no more free rides. The Fox theater went head to head with the church over who would provide the world view for the young. That night in 1963, the Fox theater won the opening skirmish (Willimon, 2014, pp. 15-16).

Sadly, this was just an example of how the church has lost influence on society. Andy Stanley, in his popular, not scholarly work *Irresistible,* makes the assertation that Christianity was deeply examined during the aftermath of 9/11 (Stanley, 2020). Furthermore, the decline of almost every major denomination, including Evangelical ones, express the decline of influence on society. However, not all hope is lost. Christianity does have some influence. Unfortunately, the influence is political pandering. However, this can change. This does not mean that there should be a return to the “church growth” movement of before. No, that movement had its own problems. But, the church can start moving toward a new influential position by redefining its mission. Kgatla and Kamukwamba begin their article writing, “The traditional definition of ‘mission’ has always carried with it the salvation or redemption connotation, leading to the division of the world into two spheres: the world for the saved and the world for the unsaved” (Kamukwamba, 2019). This definition of mission is limited and it needs to change. The traditional definition of “mission” limits the church’s influence. Martha Grace Reece explains that evangelism makes people’s lives better (Reece, 2008). Therefore, if the church wishes to increase it’s influence on society, it needs to broaden its definition of specific terms and help people live their lives better. Therefore, the Christian definition of mission needs to be broadened to include how people can have better lives through Christ; ways to cope with the realities of a non-Christian world in an educated manner; and address how Christianity and society really work well together.

## **Broadening terms and living better lives**

What is the good news of the gospel? The basic Christian answer is that Jesus came and died on the cross to save humanity’s souls from the pits of hell. While this is part of the gospel answer, it created bigger issues regarding theology such as atonement. However, it created larger issues within the sociological construct. Eventually, modern and postmodern thinkers moved beyond the typical hell-fire and brimstone thinking and started to wonder what Christianity was really all about. Stanley documents this in more detail in his popular writing called *Irresistible.* However, his answers are limited to trivial responses such as not stated, “the Bible says” (Stanley, xvi, 2002) Unfortunately, there are countless evangelical books that cite that the gospel is Jesus dying on the cross to save humanity from their sins. While this is accurate, it is not complete. Reese writes, “Classic teaching stresses that each individual’s choice to be Christian or not to be Christician decides whether the individual will spend eternity with Christ in Heaven or without Christ, in Hell. Many people in mainline churches say that they ‘sort of’ believe in Hell but they don’t really know. (Reese, 19, 2002). Therefore, if the gospel is only Christ saving people from Hell and many mainline churches do not even believe in Hell, where is the gospel?

The reality is that the gospel is far more than where someone spends their afterlife. In fact, knowing Christ helps make life make sense. It guides choices and sees the world for what it is. It understands theodicy, even if it does not know the theological terms. Furthermore, it helps people let go of guilt, here and now! Therefore, mission has to move beyond its salvific nature and delve into people’s lives here and now. Otherwise, what is the point? The best example of this is found in traditional prison ministry. Within prison ministry, the stereotype is that these people desperately need Jesus. Otherwise, why would they have committed a crime! However, a great majority of people inside prisons are not there for major crimes. In fact, they are there for minor crimes serving a variety of sentences. Most of the people, at least in the South, grew up in some form of a church. Therefore, their salvation might be intact. However, most prison ministries are not about helping people live better lives. It is about helping them go to Heaven (Bowe, 2020). Instead, these prison ministries can do both. They can show how the gospel can save someone from the pits of hell but also give them a better, more fulfilling life. Sadly, mission within the church has not done this. In fact, in Thom Rainer’s blog, he explains how mission isn’t evangelical. He states,

Community ministries are vitally important to the communities churches serve and to the churches themselves. Jesus commands us powerfully and clearly that we are to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, visit those in prisons, provide clothing to those who have none, and care for the sick (Matthew 25: 34-40). But churches can use their community ministries as a substitute for sharing their faith (Rainer, 2024)

I disagree with Rainer. While mission and community ministries are vital, like he said, they can be evangelistic because evangelism is more than just salvific events.

Unfortunately, the church is still losing influence. Almost every major denomination is declining. There are a number of reasons for this decline, but one of them is that the church lost its mission. The world progressed and the church stayed the same. Rob Bell compares the church to an Oldsmobile. He says that they don’t make Oldsmobiles anymore (Bell, 2014). However, the church is needed. But, for the church to gain influence it must recognize that the world is moving away from religious teachings.

## **Coping with the Realities of non-Christian Education**

Since 1968, there have been a number of court cases that have battled over the ability to integrate religion within the classroom. It is noted that most of the cases, including the one alluded to above are all about creationism v. evolution. It seems there is always a battle between education and religion. However, the reality of a non-Christian society dates beyond 1968. David Ward writes, “One long-term effect of the Enlightenment and the growth of modem disciplines was the secularization of knowledge and the marginalization of theology as a source of an integrating perspective on disciplinary knowledge” (Ward, 2014). For many, theological concerns within education are dated. Education has progressed and moved forward and found much of the Bible and theology to not align with history, science or mathematics. This is exemplified in 1 Kings 7:23 where Pi is 3.0. Furthermore, many scientists do not follow a young earth theory any longer. Lastly, much of the history within the Bible does not have any evidence of actually happening. So, it is natural that society has moved away from theological matters because it is dated or mythic. Sadly, the reality of these claims have caused the church to decline and religion to lose influence. It has created a society of *nones*  or *spiritual but not religious.*

However, the church and religion should not just give up and throw its hands in the air to surrender. Instead, it needs to recognize that society is moving away from religion but there is still hope. Within that hope is the integration of religion and society. It helps if the church would recognize its place and start asking the right questions. Ward explains, “Framing a good question, as Socrates might say, is the birth of learning and insight. (Ward, 2014). The church isn’t asking the right questions. Instead, it is still defending the Bible and its place within history, science, and mathematics. Sadly, this is a losing battle. But, it can gain traction if it starts asking the right questions and doing the work to find the answers within those questions. Ward states, “Christian interdisciplinary research can arise from a researcher’s response to God’s calling in any of the spheres of life that Scripture addresses: family, religion, government, work, or culture” (Ward, 2014). However, one of the realities of Christian research, within social constructs, is that religion does not have all the answers. Instead, the two have to work together. Sadly, this is one of the many challenges to interdisciplinary studies. Dennison, in a response to Ward’s article writes, “The effectual plausibility of Ward’s thesis would be enhanced if he enlightened the reader how his particular eschatological understanding of the world informs his project” (Dennison, 2014) However, what Dennison fails to recognize is that all the answers including Ward’s eschatological understanding, are not readily available. Within learning and research is the ability to change and shape our understanding. This is the point of education, to gain understanding.

But, Christianity is not perceived as gaining understanding. Instead, it is thought to have it all figured out. That is why Dennison can write his response in such a way that finds unanswered questions. Yet, the proper response to a irreligious society is recognizing that all the questions have not been answered. Furthermore, theology creates different questions. Yet, Christianity has to move from the defensive and apologetic and more toward the curious and questioning. Then, it can start to cope with the realities of a non-Christian education and engage it. It might even be able to challenge it.

## **Working Well Together**

The world is continually changing. There is so much advancement it is unreal. However, the church has limited its reaction to this ever changing world to a position as having everything figured out. The whole world is centered around what Jesus did on the cross. However, there is so much more to that within theology and religion. In fact, the entire Bible is God’s relationship with the world and it is filled with narratives, poetry, fiction, myth, and history. However, until the church recognizes a way to work within society, its influence will be limited. Kamukwamba writes,

Christendom can exist in an official, legally binding way or in an unofficial but explicit way with the constitution granting Christianity special status and in an unofficial implicit form, which is more in expression rather than in the constitution. When it exists in an official form, the church receives protection and many privileges from the civil authorities in that it is the established religion of the state (Kamukwamba, 2019)

However, it should not desire establishment, but integration. Establishment requires compliance. It is by force. However, integration is subtle. It begins to shape things in a slow manner. It creates questions that society has not been able to answer. But, that is the main thesis of this essay. While the church has lost its influence, not all hope is lost because it really works well within society, but it has some work to do. Some terms need to be broadened and it doesn’t need to limit itself to just salvific events.

# **Conclusion**

The church has lost a considerable amount of influence. Society has more options available to it than before. At one point, the church was the only thing open on Sunday and it was the source of authority. However, that has changed. In fact, the change is actually for the better. But, the church has some work to do. It has to adjust and realign its mission to thinking beyond salvific efforts and move to quality of life here and now. It does this by framing good questions and integrating itself and playing nice with society. Once this happens, slowly but surely the church can regain some of its lost influence.

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