ARCHBISHOP GOMEZ ON SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

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On Nov. 4, 2021, José Gomez, the Archbishop of Los Angeles and president of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, used Zoom to address the Congress of Catholics and Public Life in Madrid. His address was entitled “Reflections on the Church and America’s New Religions.” He said his subject was “new secular ideologies and movements for social change in the United States . . .”

Gomez said: “Whatever we call these movements, ‘social justice,’ ‘wokeness,’ ‘identity politics,’ ‘intersectionality,’ ‘successor ideology’—they claim to offer what religion provides. [They are] new religions of social justice and political identity.”

Here is what *Wikipedia* says about “woke”: “*Woke* is an adjective meaning ‘alert to racial prejudice and discrimination’ . . .” “The phrase *stay woke* had emerged in AAVE [African-American Vernacular English] by the 1930s . . .” “Beginning in the 2010s, it came to encompass a broader awareness of social inequalities such as sexism, and has also been used as shorthand for left-wing ideas involving identity politics and social justice, such as the notion of white privilege and slavery reparations for African Americans.”

Here is what *Wikipedia* says about identity politics: “Identity politics is a political approach wherein people of a particular gender, religion, race, social background, class or other identifying factors, develop political agendas that are based upon these identities. The term is used in a variety of ways to describe phenomena as diverse as multiculturalism, women’s movements, civil rights, lesbian and gay movements, and regional separatist movements.”

And here is what *Wikipedia* says about intersectionality: “Intersectionality is an analytical framework for understanding how aspects of a person’s social and political identities combine to create different modes of discrimination and privilege. The term was conceptualized and coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in a paper in 1989. Intersectionality identifies multiple factors of advantage and disadvantage. Examples of these factors include gender, caste, sex, race, class, sexuality, religion, disability, physical appearance, and height.”

Gomez claims that these social movements are similar to Marxism. I agree to the extent that, like Marxism, they concentrate on victims and oppose oppressors.

But Gomez goes on to say: “Today’s critical theories and ideologies are profoundly atheistic. They deny the soul, . . . or they think that it is irrelevant to human happiness. . . . They reduce what it means to be human to essentially physical qualities—the color of our skin, our sex, our notions of gender, our ethnic background, or our position in society. . . . [They are] pseudo-religions, and even replacements and rivals to traditional Christian beliefs . . .” (Qtd. in Jones, Autumn. “Archbishop Gomez Addresses Rise of ‘Wokeness’, Social Movements in US.” *CatholicNewsAgency*.*com*. 4 Nov. 2021. 9 Nov. 2021. Web.)

I can’t go that far. For one thing, social justice is not equivalent to wokeness, identity politics, and the rest. Social justice is simply justice between groups; it need not share with the other movements any ideology they promote. “Social justice” is the term used by Catholic moral theologians for the past 100 years to describe Catholic teachings on justice between groups!

I also think Gomez paints these movements with too broad of a brush. There are differences between them.

Moreover, I see these movements more positively than he does. They have important things to teach us, I think, especially at this point in history. The wheel of human history is undergoing a major turn, from the 500-year era of Western colonialism to (hopefully) a more egalitarian global society.

That turn was inevitable, for several reasons. First, the colonized have persisted in pointing out injustices that have been done to them; they refuse to sit down and shut up. Second, Western civilization, as it has confronted other world cultures, has been forced to see itself as one among many alternatives. Third and most importantly, the foundational principle upon which Western civilization is based—that every human being is the image of God (Gen 1:26-27) and therefore has inalienable rights and dignity—has itself forced Western civilization to reassess its treatment of those in colonized lands. Fourth, the colonized are simply the majority of humanity.

Why are American and European society and politics so polarized at present? Part of the reason, at least, is that conservatives want to conserve the privileges that colonizers (whites\*) have enjoyed, and liberals want to liberate the colonized so that they too may share in those privileges.

\* I once read that, c. 1500, Caucasoids were one fourth of humans. By c. 1900, they were one third. I assume that that is not primarily because of ill-treatment of colonized peoples, but because of (a) the introduction of germs unknown to colonized populations (“It is estimated that 95 percent of the indigenous populations in the Americas were killed by infectious diseases during the years following European colonization” [Ehrenpreis and Ehrenpreis]), and (b) advances in medications, food production, and so on in Western societies.

Privileged whites do what is necessary to ensure that their positions of privilege are not endangered. Hence the tarnishing of “woke” and “critical race theory” with negative connotations.