

John M Berner

Chapter Assignment for Group 2

Multiculturalism

## Chapter 4: Conflicting Themes of Assimilation and Pluralism Among European Americans, Jewish Americans, and African Americans

Assimilation is the merging of cultural traits from distinct cultural ethnic groups. It is about conforming to a way of life that everyone is comfortable with. Pluralism is quite the opposite in that minority groups participate fully in the dominant society, but they keep their ethnic customs.

“. . . White ethnic groups who did not appear racially different from the Caucasian core could, if they so chose, give up their language and traditions, change their names and assimilate. However, this was not possible for African Americans, East Asian Americans, Native Americans, or darker skinned Mexican Americans. Members of these racially identifiable ethnic groups who wanted to melt in were prevented from doing so”(pg. 102). Caucasians developed a culture from large numbers of different ethnic back grounds. Other minority groups were segregated because of what they looked like. There was no way that they could hide their background, so the cultures couldn't be developed and fused into the common so called American society.

“Diversity among European Americans is rooted in how they have evolved through their relations with other ethnic groups and the larger society”(pg. 103). History is important to this subject because it explains how different cultures crossed paths to create a nation that is productive. “. . . the 3 million English immigrants assimilated most swiftly . . . As a group, they were spared the poverty, language differences, hostility, and discrimination experienced by most other European immigrants . . . With the exception of the British immigrants, virtually all the immigrants from Europe experienced harsh prejudice and discrimination”(pg. 107) When we were settling America, we all had to adjust to different cultures, just as the minority groups of today are trying to do. The difference is that we assimilated. The majority of Europe had to learn English in order to work with other cultures.

Another conflict among people other than national origins is religion. The interesting thing about religion is that it had spread across several nations throughout history. It is based more on beliefs and dedication than by geographical boundaries. Now what makes religion considered an ethnicity is that it has customs. Religion could be organized in groups, and outsiders could feel the same prejudices if the ideas and beliefs were unlike their own. Boundaries can; however, affect some of the lifestyles and customs in the same religion. They each had different reasons to migrate. "Individual Jews were among the earliest settlers who came to the Atlantic coast colonies in the 1600's. . . Sephardic Jews in Spain enjoyed more freedom and attained greater positions of wealth and power than Jews anywhere else in Europe. . . they tended to look down on other Jews who were not of Sephardic origins, particularly the German Jewish immigrants. . . German Jews differed from later Jewish immigrants in that they did not settle in concentrated Jewish communities. Instead they spread out across the nation, working as "small tradesmen and professionals scattered among their non-Jewish clientele. . . The third group of Jewish immigrants came from Eastern Europe, particularly from Russia, where Jews were the victims of Russification and of peasant massacres called pogroms. Between 1880 and World War 1, approx. 2 million Jews fled to the United States. Sowell writes that their arrival was an acute embarrassment to the German Jews in America"(pg.111 to 112).

Many of our religions today came from the foundation of Judaism. It was our roots, and we should keep the histories alive. "Despite long centuries of political fragmentation and persecution, Jews have kept alive their religion and cultural traditions. Judaism is one of the world's oldest religions and was the first to teach the existence of one God, giving birth to both Christianity and Islam"(pg.114). It explained what made us what we are today and that is what makes it special.

African Americans have played an important role in the development of our country, but in order to keep the balance of power in control by the Caucasians, they received little credit. Slavery had them doing the labors of others. "Once the concept of chattel slavery evolved in the late 1600's, slaves became property for life and passed the legacy on to their children. . . Free people of color were denied voting rights, were excluded from the militia and from carrying U.S. mail, and were permitted to bear arms only if they could obtain a permit"(pg.116 to 117). This is where assimilation and pluralism has not accommodated the ethnic groups of color. It is best categorized as cultural suppression. They were not able to melt into the mixing pot except for

receiving so called American names, and they were unable to participate in political or business actions. If any culture is kept, it would have to have been done in secret because other cultures wouldn't stand for it. "The long post-emancipation period of sharecropping and tenancy was a time of lynching, race riots, Jim Crow legislation, and the rise of terrorist groups such as the Klux Klan"(pg. 120).

Although assimilation appeared to be a great way to solve communication problems among cultures and to make the minority groups feel welcome, it could be just as harmful as cultural suppression as seen with the massacres of Jews in Europe and the slavery of African Americans in our own nation. People didn't want to give up the foundations of their life just so they could fit in. It was a great deal to ask, and as seen with the Jews, they didn't give up without a fight to the death. Pluralism was what we needed to have looked for, but there was even more to it than that. We were all different, and we all had an equal right to live on this planet. What we needed was the understanding of everybody's origin, the right to differences and the freedom to live our lives among those who were different as we so chose as long as the rights of others were not violated.