GALATIANS 3:28 AND THE PROBLEM OF EQUALITY IN THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY

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I. Introduction

The ancient Mediterranean world was redolent with economic, national, racial, social, and gender hierarchies, divisions, and inequalities, like many societies in the modern world. While the kinds of human rights that have developed in the West during the past two centuries, influenced by the Enlightenment, have roots in the ancient world, those rights were based not on secular conceptions of the human person that have flourished in modern liberal democratic regimes, but rather on the religious ideologies of various ancient ethnolinguistic groups. This essay, dedicated to my friend and former colleague, Tom Tobin, S.J., will focus on the evidence for the theoretical and practical conceptions of equality in early Christianity, with emphasis on equality in the three areas of nationality, social status and gender, under the assumption that equality is a basic constituent of human rights everywhere.

Since ancient societies had an essentially religious orientation, conceptions of equality that have modern analogues were based on religious rather than secular or rational presuppositions. Monotheism (the belief that one God exists and no others), for example, appears to have functioned as a necessary, though insufficient, cause for the development of the conception of equality between major ethnolinguistic groups. In post-exilic period (i.e., following the mid-sixth century bce), Judaism developed an ethnocentric form of ethical monotheism in which the God of Israel was identified with the one God of the cosmos with the

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1 The phrase “ethnolinguistic group” indicates a society that typically shares a common language and a common ethnicity (i.e., according to Weber a social construct and so distinct from race) and consequently have a common self-designation, sense of common identity, a common history (real or imagined) and kinship ties. The traditional conception of “race” has not proven to be helpful in recent years and has been replaced by more accurate descriptions of people that share many physical and cultural features such as “bio-geographical ancestry.”
implication that the gods worshiped by Gentiles were idols with no reality. While some Jews maintained that all people would eventually share the blessings attendant on recognizing the God of Israel as the one and only God (particularly in the latter days), other Jews were negative about the access that the Gentiles could have to God and expected that they would finally be excluded from his presence and annihilated.\(^2\)

Another form of monotheism was developed in Stoicism, founded in the late fourth century BCE by Zeno of Citium (334–262 BCE). Stoics formulated a strikingly non-ethnocentric form of materialistic monism in which God and the material world were considered identical.\(^3\) God was also regarded as identical with Reason or Mind, which pervades the cosmos and is also present in gods and human beings. One social implication of this form of monotheism that helped to break down national and social barriers is that individual human natures are parts of universal nature.\(^4\) Stoics were famously cosmopolitans who held that all people are equal and should live in mutual love and understanding.\(^5\)

In addition to having an essentially religious orientation, ancient societies had conceptions of the human person that differed from notions of the autonomous self that developed in the west beginning with Augustine’s *Confessions* through the Enlightenment to modern western liberal democracies. The differences between ancient and modern western conceptions of the person are often understood in terms of the dichotomous models of “individualism-collectivism” (describing cultures) or “idiocentrism-allocentrism” (describing individuals who are part of those cultures).\(^6\) Individualistic cultures and idiocentric persons emphasize values that serve the interests of the self (by making the self feel good, distinguished, independent), while collectivist cultures emphasize values that subordinate personal goals to the values of the

\(^2\) The variegated view that Jews had of gentiles from the Hebrew Bible to the early rabbinic period is discussed by E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 212–218.

\(^3\) Zeno and Chrysippus according to Diogenes Laertius 7.148–149 (*Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* 2.1022, 1132); Seneca *Epistulae morales* 92.30.

\(^4\) Chrysippus according to Diogenes Laertius 7.87–89 (*Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* 3.178).

\(^5\) Epictetus *Discourses* 2.5.26.