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Response: Are American Christians Persecuted?

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Dr. Kennedy, the Christian Sophist
By Susan Trollinger

“America is a Christian nation.”
“America is God’s chosen nation.”
“America is the greatest country on Earth.”
“In America, anyone can succeed if they work hard enough.”

For many Christians in the United States, these statements are true and uncontestable. There is no need to defend them. No evidence is required to substantiate them. Taken as truth, they serve as the basis for other claims such as that children should pray in public schools, that the US military should force other nations to adopt the US as their model for economy and/or government, and that anti-poverty programs are not just a waste of tax-payer money but are immoral. Dr. Kennedy adds to this list the following claim: “In the US, Christians are persecuted.”

Like the claims listed above, the claim that Christians are persecuted in the US serves as the ground for other arguments. Chief among them is the argument that secular-liberal-humanists are winning a culture war that has undermined all that is good, right, and true in America and that it is time for all who call themselves Christian to stand up and fight to take back this country and restore it to its glory as the City on a Hill.

Arguments like these matter because they effectively convince earnest Christians to brook no compromise. Whatever the issue—health care, the debt ceiling, immigration—good Christians must never waver on the truths they know since the character and future of this nation are at stake.

Today, we call these truths “truisms.” Way back in the Fifth Century, BCE, in Athens when Western democracy was in early bloom, the Sophists (renowned for their

ability to teach the art of persuasion, or rhetoric, in a city whose business was increasingly decided by arguments and speeches) called such truisms *doxa*.

The Sophists' notion of *doxa* was powerful for the way it enabled Athenians to think about truth in a new way. For people who grew up in, say, Athens or some other ancient Greek city-state, the truths of that city-state about what it meant to be Greek, what sort of government was best, who was their true enemy, and so forth seemed true and uncontested. But for Sophists who taught rhetoric across city-states, "truths" that were indisputable in one city-state often differed significantly from the "truths" of other city-states. Thus, in Sparta the truth about a free woman was that she was educated, athletic, and visible in public; in Athens, she had no need for formal education, ought to marry very young, and must be kept inside the home.

For the Sophists, noticing that "truth" differed from one city-state to another was important because it suggested that what seems beyond doubt isn't. The Sophists knew that the way Athenians thought about free women was not the only way to think about them. Maybe the Athenians had "woman" right; maybe the Spartans did. Or maybe they both had it wrong.

From this insight, the Sophists inferred that on any question there is never just one answer. Moreover, they taught that the job of the rhetorician is to enable the audience to see that this is so. Thus, the Sophists regularly spoke about the most seemingly irrefutable truths. They challenged them, offered up alternative truths, and then invited their audiences to decide what the truth really was. What the Sophists provide today, then, is the idea rhetoric done well has the power to undermine the presumption of "truths" that

may not be true at all. They also teach us that good rhetoric empowers people to think for themselves.

While many preachers in the US build mega-churches by massaging such popular truths as the following: that America is God's favored nation, that extending a hand to the poor just makes them dependent, that all liberals are relativists, and so forth, Dr. Kennedy (with a PhD in rhetoric) takes a different tack. Taking a page out of the Sophists' playbook, Kennedy cannot rest easy in the comfortable doxa of the day. Instead, he turns it on its head and invites us to think for ourselves.

Christians in America are not persecuted, he argues. On the contrary, they are favored in all sorts of ways. Moreover, he continues, whereas Christians in the past knew that preaching/living the Gospel could mean persecution in the form of real bodily pain, Christians today cringe at the thought of "speak[ing] of Jesus in public" for fear of appearing stupid or weird.

Kennedy, the Sophist, serves us well by overturning the popular truths that both mask our privilege as Christians in America and embolden us, thanks to larger arguments about the culture war, to show no mercy to those who are, in fact, persecuted—the poor, the immigrant, the other.

But there is more. Not satisfied (like the Sophists) to turn truth on its head so that we can think for ourselves, he pushes the good purpose of rhetoric further. Whereas the Sophists seemed content to promote a politics that seeks to enable people to think for themselves, Kennedy puts rhetoric in the service of a politics of Jesus. For Kennedy, it is not enough to turn the worldly-Christian truths on their heads. He wants to show us that if

we mean to follow Jesus, we better focus our eyes on the Cross to be a people, not of God's favor or of world domination, but of "submission, thanksgiving, and gratitude."

Having turned the "American-Christians-are-persecuted" truth on its head, Kennedy the *Christian Sophist* turns that truth again, this time not so as merely to negate it but, instead, in order to remind us that Christians *should* be persecuted. Or, better put, that Christians should preach/live the Gospel so boldly that the powers would find it necessary to persecute us. Rather than pine after the status of God's chosen nation, he implores Christians, we ought to follow Jesus on the Cross and become a people who "find[s] power in weakness and wisdom in folly."

Of course, if you want to win a culture war, "submission, thanksgiving, and gratitude" probably won't be your weapons of choice. Identifying the enemy, demonizing it, and cooking up strategies to destroy it (or at least kick it out of the US) are likely to seem much more effective. And that may be so, if it's a war you want to fight. But Jesus wasn't a warrior. He didn't seek victory in a culture war or any other. For those who wanted the Messiah to be a warrior-king, Jesus was a disappointment, dying in the most humiliating fashion in the face of his enemies.

"American Christians are persecuted." Jesus would surely find such a claim laughable. "To be good Christians, we need to fight a war against secular liberals, immigrants, the poor, Muslims." Jesus would surely find that claim laughable too. But living as we do in a culture of fear, anxiety, and competition, it's hard for us to get the joke.

Thankfully, we have Christian-Sophists, like Dr. Kennedy, who (because they have studied the Bible long and hard and have consulted the wisdom of the ages) know

which truths of the Bible are “load-bearing” and can show us the folly of our worldly “truths” and the wisdom of the Lamb.