

SERIOUS TIMES

MAKING YOUR LIFE MATTER IN AN URGENT DAY

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Heteronormative at Harvard

Actress Jada Pinkett Smith was recently honored as the “Artist of the Year” by the Harvard Foundation for Intercultural and Race Relations at the Foundation’s 20th annual Cultural Rhythms show. In a speech many students considered inspirational and motivating, Pinkett Smith gave a warm, teary thanks and then shared life lessons with the audience. “Don’t let anybody define who you are,” she said. “Don’t let them put you in a box.” She told them about her childhood with teenage parents both addicted to heroin, but triumphantly proclaimed, “I can stand here on this stage and say that I’ve proven them all wrong.”

She then addressed issues regarding the roles of men and women today, specifically encouraging woman to fight against the idea that choosing a career means having to choose against marriage and family. “Women, you can have...a loving man, devoted husband, loving children,... [and a] career...All you have to do is want it.” Pinkett Smith has been married to actor Will Smith since 1997 and is the mother of two children.

Though the Cultural Rhythms show is designed to feature culturally unique forms of artistic expression, along the lines of varying forms of music, the Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, Transgender, and Supporters Alliance (BGLTSA) were offended that Pinkett Smith’s comments seemed specific to heterosexual relationships. Conceding that there was nothing in her remarks that were remotely homophobic, the BGLTSA nonetheless expressed concern that her content was “extremely heteronormative” – meaning her comments implied that standard sexual relationships are only between males and females, making BGLTSA members feel uncomfortable.

The BGLTSA called for, and received, an apology from the Foundation, which further committed to “take responsibility to inform future speakers that they will be speaking to an audience diverse in race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, gender and class.”

Frederick Buechner writes in his memoir *Telling Secrets* of his experience at Harvard, and how one day the price of such rampant pluralism became evident.

I had been speaking as candidly and personally as I knew how about my own faith and how I had tried over the years to express it in language. At the same time I had been trying to get the class to respond in kind. For the most part none of them were responding at all but just sitting there taking it in without saying a word. Finally I had to tell them what I thought. I said they reminded me of a lot of dead fish lying on cracked ice in a fish store

window with their round blank eyes. There I was, making a fool of myself spilling out to them the secrets of my heart, and there they were, not telling me what they believed about anything beneath the level of their various causes. It was at that point that a black African student got up and spoke. "The reason I do not say anything about what I believe," he said in his stately African English, "is that I'm afraid it will be shot down." At least for a moment we all saw, I think, that the danger of pluralism is that it becomes factionalism, and that if factions grind their separate axes too vociferously, something mutual, precious, and human is in danger of being drowned out and lost.

As pluralism becomes increasingly rooted and absolute in our culture, voices daring to espouse traditional values, much less Christian ones, will be increasingly pressured to remain silent. They will not simply be met with hostility (Neuhaus' "naked public square"), or be trivialized in public discourse (Carter's "culture of disbelief"). There will be increasing pressure for such voices never to be heard. The spirit of pluralism will create a culture of oppression, for the one thing that cannot be said in such a context is that which is, by its very nature, exclusive.

This calls the Christian to embody one of the more foundational character traits lauded in Scripture, which is courage. Many years ago, the late Brent Curtis gave advice to the now-bestselling author John Eldredge that changed his life: "Let people feel the weight of who you are," he said, "and let them deal with it." As the pressure from our increasingly pluralistic culture bears down on voices that would speak winsomely and compellingly into the cultural wasteland in ways that challenge the prevailing ethos, we must not only take heart, but be willing to let people feel the weight of who we are, and let them deal with it.

And they will. Ofole U. Mgbako, a performer in the Cultural Rhythms show who watched Pinkett Smith's speech, said he thought the speech was "insightful." "You can never appeal to every single group," he said. "You'll always in some way be exclusive. I thought her message was clear. I thought it was sincere."

James Emery White

Sources

"Cultural Rhythms Showcases Talent," Evelyn Lilly, The Harvard Crimson, News Section, Monday, February 28, 2005. Online edition: <http://www.thecrimson.com>.

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Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic Books/Harper Collins, 1993).

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