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Published on Ekklesia (<http://ekkleisia.co.uk>) Excerpted

Inaugurating Jesus?

By Martin E. Marty 28 Jan 2009

The apostle Paul claimed that Jesus, in the form of "Christ crucified," was "a stumbling block [*skandalon* = scandal = offence] to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (I Corinthians 1.23) Jews + Gentiles = pretty much everybody.

What has this to do with religion in modern public life? Try this: On Saturday 25 January 2009 my internet search engine turned up 484,000 references to "Jesus" or "Christ" linked with "inauguration," and yours may find even more by today. That's "public."

So Jesus is my topic, as we leave the inaugural events surrounding President Barack Obama behind but still have controversies ahead.

Many US citizens are at ease with prayers in pluralistic America when they are generic, civil, God-ly. Invoke Jesus, however, and not a few are scandalized by the reference, while others are scandalized by the scandalized.

I propose a thesis. Correct me if I have it wrong, lest I keep spreading wrongness. Thesis: Jesus is not the scandal. The *use of Jesus* in public at "we the people of the United States" occasions is usually the offence. Jesus gets from one- to four-star ratings in the following publics:

First the company of non-believers, secular humanists, atheists, deists, et cetera, who often admire teachings of Jesus. Their American patriarch Thomas Jefferson even published his annotated anthology of *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*.

Jews have suffered at the hands of millions of followers of Jesus, but some very fine books on Jesus as rabbi get published – by rabbis – without scandalizing. My wife and I attend a "Music of the Baroque" series with many Jews in the audience and some in the chorus and orchestra, as they perform music with Jesus-words, some of them not kind toward Jews. "No problem" they say. Yet many are uneasy with the invocation of Jesus in general public and often official events.

Muslims revere Jesus the prophet. Of course, with the other groups just mentioned, they do not accept his divinity, but he is in the Qur'an, and they are respectful, except, again, in certain public settings. Jesus is not in Hindu scriptures, but most Hindus say "no problem" about many of his teachings and about him – in context.

No matter what is said in public, what do the inhabitants of the previous three paragraphs hear? First, they hear: "We belong, and you don't." They hear assertions of majority privilege in the religious realm, where such privilege often has taken form in power against others. Second, they hear: "We have things figured out, and you don't," and find such claims insulting, since issues of truth based in scriptural revelations cannot be settled in civic discourse and civic debate.

Christians are taught to pray in the name of Jesus, and I join the two billion Christians around the world in doing so. It is theologically correct, liturgically appropriate, and personally, as in matters of piety, clarifying and warm.

But such beliefs and practices do not license privilege, assertions of power, or exclusivity in public settings. Because of our confusion on this, we Americans spend more energy debating inaugural and other prayers than praying them, to the point that their point is obscured.

We should devise some signal by which those who pray particular prayers (as I believe all are) let everyone know that while praying in their own integral style and form, they are aware and will at least implicitly assure their audiences that they are not speaking for everyone. They can then encourage others to translate what is being said into contexts they find congenial, and still share a communal experience.

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