

BRIDGING THE SECULAR DIVIDE

Religion and Canadian Public Discourse

VIEW FROM THE HILL SESSION

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This national conference is encouraging leaders from a range of faith communities to engage meaningfully in the public policy process. The late Catholic theologian Hans Kung was convinced that there would be “no peace among the nations without peace among the religions.” Can anyone here today disagree? I would here congratulate Barbara and Patrick Keenan for last week donating \$5 million to create a McGill chair in interfaith studies.

In the mid-1990s, hundreds of us Edmontonians of differing faiths gathered at city hall to protest the “ethnic cleansing” and other persecution of our Muslim sisters and brothers in former Yugoslavia? How proud we all were that day! A few years later, many of us did the same thing at the legislative assembly to denounce the mistreatment of Christians in Pakistan. Why don't we all do the same whenever any faith community is being persecuted anywhere? One answer is that we could be doing so virtually daily.

The 20th century has many substantive lessons to offer about interfaith co-operation? The first half of it saw slaughter, cruelty, enslavement and torture on a scale that the world had probably never before seen. Tens of millions of human beings in all likelihood died at the hands of professed enemies of every religions like Hitler, Stalin and Mao. Much of the violence was aimed at men, women and children whose fatal failing was practising a religious faith.

One of the miracles of the twentieth century in my view was the refusal of God to be driven from human consciousness by the likes of Marx, Hegel, Huxley, Nietzsche, Russell, Shaw, Sartre and others who attacked only with their pens. Belief in God continued among most of humanity across the planet and is now growing strongly in many communities.

UN and Religious Freedom

Today, it is frequently forgotten where the United Nations stands on freedom of religion. Article 18 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948

declared that “everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.” This is observed more in the breach in some countries today.

A half-century later, most of the world’s governments have committed themselves on paper at least through international agreements to protect religious freedom for all their nationals. The gap between promise and performance remains large for believers in many lands who find that their right to religious freedom is either observed more in the breach or not at all by unscrupulous governments.

We know about the totalitarian regimes, which for ideological reasons will tolerate no God or Allah competing with a Leviathan god. But what about democratic governments which stigmatize minority religion they don’t favour as “cults”?

Did not the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan make human rights central to all UN programming? Did he not declare: “...I believe human rights are the core of our sacred bond with the peoples of the United Nations.” More than any other Sec.-Gen, Annan has spoken most not only on advancing human rights but of punishing those who abuse them. Four years ago, he said: “We should leave no one in doubt that for the mass murderers, the “ethnic cleansers”, those guilty of shocking violations of human rights, impunity is not acceptable. The United Nations will never be their refuge, its Charter never the source of conflict of jurisdiction. They are our enemies, regardless of race, religion or nation, and only in their defeat can we redeem the promise of this great organization.”

Peace Among Faiths

No-one here needs to be told that interfaith violence is already one of the major problems of the 21st century. How can you and I help to reduce it? One way is for all of us to learn more about other faith communities so that we can debunk the myth-making that so commonly is a precursor to violence. *The World’s Great Religions*. It notes where various faiths stand on the sensitive issue of forced conversions. Let me only refer to only five religions:

Hinduism

There is nowhere in Hinduism, which goes back 4000 years and has no central authority or hierarchy, a basis for coercing non-believers to become Hindus? Did not Prime Minister Nehru of India, who was political disciple of one of history’s best-known Hindus, Mohatma Gandhi, pride himself on India’s secularism and constitution which prohibited the spending of public money for any religion and

the teaching of faith in public schools. Has not Hinduism flourished since among many Indians is this structure just as religion has done in the US, which also separates church and state rigidly?

Buddhism

In gentle Buddhism, going back 2500 years and being one of the most ennobling influences anywhere, there is no authority for coercion. Gautama, or the Buddha, gave up three palaces, took up the life of a wandering mendicant, achieved the enlightenment he was seeking, and began to preach about it. During the ensuing 45 years in northern India, the Buddha never used force to win a convert. He once rebuked some of his followers who had resorted to violence: "Shame on him that strikes; greater shame on him who, stricken, strikes back."

Islam


In Islam, nowhere is coercion sanctioned throughout the thirteen centuries since the Prophet Mohammed died in 632 ACE? Does not the Quran say, "Let there not be any coercion in faith,"? The God of Islam, Allah, is also the God of Judaism and Christianity and other faiths, whose word for Muslims was fulfilled in the Koran. The Prophet was the spokesperson of God, who experienced revelations from God for a decade or more, which he set down in the the holy book of Islam. Later, Muslims developed an outstanding culture in art, philosophy, poetry, mathematics, architecture and medicine.

Judaism

Like Christianity and Islam, Judaism rests on the concept of strict monotheism. Among numerous other features, it looks to an after life, but is strongly earth-centred, with much stress on a never-ceasing effort to know God's will as set down in the Torah. Judaism sees history climaxing in a happier age when all peoples "beat their swords into plowshares".

Christianity

Christians believe that the resurrected Jesus Christ lives forever to intercede for humankind. He is not only the founder of the faith but the essence of it. He never forces Himself on anyone. A true Christian cannot justify doing what Christ would never do. There were, of course, the Inquisition and the four "Crusades", but these had nothing to do with the true teachings of our Saviour and everything to do with misinterpretation of the Bible by persons in particular times and communities.



For reasons which usually relate to national demographics, harassment and persecution of Christians are also escalating. A 2011 Pew Forum study estimated that this is now happening in a majority of the world's independent nations. One estimate is that about 105,000 Christians are murdered annually because of their faith. This means that one Christian is killed every five minutes somewhere.

Ending it and the persecution of every other religious community is proving difficult. Miroslav Volf of Croatia concludes in his book, *Exclusion and Embrace*, "There can be no peace among nations without peace among religions. Since religious peace can be established only through religious dialogue ... reconciliation between peoples depends on the success of the inter-religious dialogue. For reconciliation to take place, the inscriptions of hatred must be carefully erased and the threads of violence gently removed."

Where does this mix at home and abroad leave religion and politics domestically today in Canada? Permit me as someone who represented constituents of many faiths and none during almost 27 years in the House of Commons to make two points:

First, most voters — at least those in southeastern Edmonton before 2006 — appeared to have no problem with their MP being a person with a religious affiliation, provided they do not impose it on others. This is doubtless why the two most difficult issues I faced in trying to be a good representative for all were abortion and same-sex marriage.

Second, Canadians are diverse in their views, including their religious ones, but a great many maintain strong spiritual faiths.

That diversity equates to a multitude of voices in policy-making, which is an important quality to Canadian governance.

Thank you.