

“The Religification of Canada” March 6, 2011

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Reading – from “Spiritual Courage” a sermon by Rev. Barbara Wells ten Hove

Some years ago I had the opportunity to read *Conscience and Courage - Rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust* by Eva Fogelman. The book is a collection of stories of people who showed tremendous moral courage during the most difficult of times.

Here was courage and bravery all rolled into one. Here were people who did things that most of us pray we'll never have to do. Here were people whose choice to act courageously not only saved the lives of Jews during the Second World War, but also transformed their own lives forever.

The acts of courage described in this book are tremendous. Here are just a few: a 17-year-old Polish girl who hid 13 Jews in a small apartment; a young boy who took only half of his medicine at the hospital so his Jewish “brother” could have the other half as he lay sick in hiding; and an entire village in France who hid and saved hundreds of Jewish children for the duration of the war. All these acts and many more were the deeds of children, women and men who, for some reason, displayed extraordinary moral and physical courage. While others participated in the violence, or watched and did nothing, these people risked their lives to help others. Why? What made these people courageous and others not?

The author, Eva Fogelman, is hesitant to draw too many generalizations. Much depended upon the circumstances. But there are a few important things she noticed in her interviews with hundreds of these rescuers of Jews during the Second World War that allowed her to draw at least some tentative conclusions about how and why people are courageous in the face of injustice.

Most of these rescuers, she says, were raised in homes that honored difference. Our own religion suggests we do the same. A small personal example from my family speaks to this. My grandmother Stella Sumner was born and raised in the Deep South, only two generations removed from the Civil War. Yet during the 1930s and 40s, when the social segregation of black Americans was the accepted custom in her small town in Georgia, she nonetheless taught my mother to call all black men Mister and all black women Missus and to treat them with respect. This may sound like a small thing, but in those days and in that town it was not. All black men were called Uncle, and all black women Aunt. For my grandmother to teach my mother to give these men and women the kind of respect usually given only to white people seared into my mother the notion that all people have worth and dignity.

Role models are critical. Eva Fogelman's research on rescuers of Jews during the Second World War showed that an astonishing 89% “had a parent or adult figure who acted as an altruistic role model.” One of the rescuers described her mother as “a wonderful woman who always had an open heart for anybody who needed help.”

Part One- The Problem of Multiculturalism

2011 marks the 40th year of the official policy of multiculturalism – a word which Canada contributed to the international lexicon, by the way. Today the headlines are filled with European nations renouncing such multicultural policies as they had implemented. The policies are condemned for fostering difference and damaging

national cohesion. We see an increasing backlash against immigrant workers of all stripes and a negative reaction to Muslim dress- especially for women, in France. Switzerland held a referendum on the banning of minarets in mosques last year. Just a few weeks ago British Prime Minister David Cameron delivered a speech to the Munich Security Conference declaring multiculturalism to be dead in Britain.

As a church community mostly comprised of social liberals, I expect that many Unitarians in Canada have been troubled, if not shocked by these developments. I know that I, at least, am deeply saddened. I have always believed that the best possible future for humanity would grow out of efforts to understand and appreciation our differences, and to develop an even greater appreciation of our underlying similarities. The first Unitarian minister in Transylvania, Francis David, said nearly 500 years ago, "We need not think alike to love alike." The golden rule is the same in every religion on the planet and gee whiz, my favourite event of the summer is the Heritage Festival!

But the nations of Europe are feeling threatened with a loss of identity and perceive a tearing of their social fabrics. Governments, with popular support, are retrenching into a new kind of nationalism. Immigration is becoming tougher and tougher and citizenship in those lands is increasingly harder to get – much more difficult than in Canada or even the U.S.

A few reasons why are clear. Most of the wealthiest European nations at one time had colonies up until the 1950's and all have substantial populations that hail from former colonies. The nations of the west share borders with the much poorer nations of the east and north Africa, and there are huge numbers of people coming from those places looking for work. And as radical Islam rises and distorts the beautiful message of that faith into a banner for hate and violence against all things western, the nations of Europe are holding a nervous frontline.

But we in Canada don't have most of those issues. We share no borders with poor countries. We have never had colonies, although one could argue that the subjugation of the first nations created a colony within our borders. And since before we first became a nation – way back at the time of the British Conquest in 1759, we began working on accommodations between French and English, Catholic and mostly Protestant and for a time at least, European and native. However imperfectly those accommodations have worked, we are still a nation 250 years after conquest.

So why is multiculturalism being questioned so strongly on its 40th birthday? Last Fall the Globe and Mail published a six part series on the topic. Much of what follows was gleaned from that series. By way of stating the problem I want to share a few facts and figures and quotes from concerned Canadians. In the sermon half a bit later, I will try to find some answers from our Unitarian tradition.

First some numbers: Canada currently welcomes about 230,000 immigrants per year (the ratio has stayed much the same over time), but the places of origin of those immigrants has shifted radically in the past decades.

The birth rate is in decline. In 1991 16% of Canadians were foreign born. By 2030 it is estimated that number will be 30%

More than 40% of landed immigrants between 1982 and 2001 have a 'high degree of religiosity' compared to 26% of Canadians, suggesting that religion in the public sphere is growing ever more important.

Islam is the fastest growing religion in Canada. Sikh extremists in the 1980's and '90's used their Gurdwaras as meeting places. We recently heard an Edmonton police detective being taken to the woodshed after expressing concerns that members of the Somali community would not help in his murder investigations....killing of a Somali immigrant. Are those last few statements racist and anti-religious freedom? or are they simply factual statements?

To use them to draw conclusions about all –or even anything more than a small minority of Somalis or Sikhs or Muslims would be racist. Part of the problem is finding a balance between fact and hyperbole. We have always been prone to exaggerating our fears. In the early 1800's Ontario newspapers were alarmed by the arrival of waves of Irish Catholics. During the wars Canada interned Ukrainians and Japanese for fear of treachery. In the 20th century police officers lamented the 'omerta' the code of silence among Italian Mafia families. The anxiety of today is no different, it just has different focal points.

But underneath this, is there a real problem with multiculturalism? Some voices:

Gov. General Lord Tweedsmuir , 1935 speech in rural Manitoba: You will all be better Canadians for being also good Ukrainians.

Author Neil Bissoondath: Canadian multiculturalism limits the freedoms of minorities by confining them to cultural ghettos. (paraphrase)

Jean Charest, Premier of Quebec as legislation banning the niqab was tabled: Immigration to Quebec is a privilege and welcoming immigrants is a responsibility for all Quebecois. Between the two you have to know where to draw the line.

Justice Beverly McLachlin: Canada's darkest moments have been the result of attempts to break with accommodation and impose policies that hurt minorities: residential schools, internment of minorities during the wars, Chinese head tax.

Tariq Fateh, Muslim Canadian Congress Founder: The Canadian multicultural model has failed...it is too tolerant in allowing extremist Muslim immigrants. The second generation is often less loyal to Canada than the first.

Bernie Farber, Canadian Jewish Congress responding to Tariq Fateh: It (multiculturalism) takes time for generations to acclimate.

BC Politician Ujal Dosanjh: Sikh extremism takes root under multiculturalism.

Globe and Mail editorial: Canadians should not be afraid to articulate a sense of what defines the country and that citizenship brings with it responsibilities, not just rights... We must have the courage to build a successful society around a concept of citizenship.

Kerri Sakamoto, Novelist: We have outgrown multiculturalism. We are a nation of communities within communities, diasporas within diasporas, all coming and going. The mosaic is splintered beyond articulation.

Anosh Irani, writer: We need to help immigrants do what they are good at. Get bureaucracy out of the way so that doctors do not have to drive cabs and university professors do not have to work at gas stations. A feeling of self worth will work wonders for morale and in turn they will reach out and make a difference.

Rudyard Griffiths, founder, Dominion Institute: Pluralism asks people to define themselves as individuals and have their rights recognized, but also to take their civic role more seriously.

Marco Navarro-Genie, Frontier Center for Public Policy: Doctrinal multiculturalism misguidedly pushes people to be with their own as a form of state-induced therapy. The isolation of communities along ethnic lines keeps individuals from the very experience of variety that official multiculturalism celebrates, and shuts them from the core culture. As such, official multiculturalism fails us twice.

Jean Augustine, Ontario Fairness Commissioner: We see ourselves as open and welcoming but skilled professionals face far too many barriers to integration once they arrive. They need more bridge programs and fair, open and transparent assessment of their qualifications by regulatory bodies.

Multiculturalism is not only about respecting one another but making sure each person who joins us is productive.

Part Two - Sermon "The Religification of Canada"

Last week I spoke about our children's curriculum, Windows and Mirrors, one that invites children both to look at themselves even as they look at the social structures that shape and challenge our society. Multiculturalism is one of those structures.

To be honest, this sermon has been a struggle, partly because what I have read has caused me to look in my own mirror and challenge assumptions. But the other reason is all of you. I confess that even asking questions about the value of religious and cultural diversity that the policy implies in a place like this makes me nervous. After all, our first principle lifts up the inherent worth and dignity of all, and the rest celebrate good things like equity, justice, freedom and democracy and assert our essential interconnectedness. Challenging multiculturalism here seems like a sure loser in those circumstances.

And deep down, I am not challenging the philosophy behind multiculturalism. But 40 years on, perhaps we need to look at the implementation. We need to look at what's really outside the window and what's really inside the mirror.

Canada currently welcomes about 230,000 immigrants a year. About 18% of that number comes to Edmonton. But, what is the quality of that welcome? As close as I can figure, our national policies help newcomers find their own communities within Canada, and then perhaps some language and job training courses. The idea is that during the period of adjustment, they can have a place where familiar language, food, music and cultural practices can be found. They don't have to give up their identity to become Canadian.

The problem is that while we are very good at helping immigrants find these places of comfort, we don't seem to do a very good job of helping them leave them and get into the mainstream. I am going to bet that immigrants embrace cultural change with just about the same level of enthusiasm as the rest of us...which means they don't all that much. We are all more comfortable with the familiar, among our own tribe and with our own customs. If it's easy to not change, a good many of us won't unless it feels absolutely necessary. And if a particular population is large enough, there is a good chance that the cultural practices of their homelands will find footing here. Those practices do not always mesh with 'traditional Canadian values' whatever they are. Perhaps we need to do a bit more to educate and encourage to not just seek citizenship, but to 'become Canadian'...as soon as we figure out what THAT is.

But we also have a challenge to provide real opportunities for newcomers who

wish to integrate. Our own church rents space to a school that prepares foreign trained engineers to qualify for their professions here. There are far too many physicians, nurses, engineers, accountants, lawyers and social workers mopping floors and driving cabs in pursuit of the Canadian dream. The barriers thrown up in front of these good and willing people are often arbitrary and very expensive to climb. We are not treating these people fairly or honourably. The quality of our welcome is strained. We are impeding them from assimilating and forcing them into their multicultural ghettos only letting them out to show us their dances and share their food at the Heritage Festival.

But let's say we are able to fix those problems – and they are not hard to fix. There is still a mighty big elephant in the room – well, two of them actually: racism and religion. I don't know if you have noticed this or not, but a lot of the immigrants today not only don't act like real Canadians they don't look like us either!

We have long fooled ourselves into believing that we don't have a problem with racism in Canada. The rapid increase in immigration by people of colour starting about the time of official multiculturalism has proven the lie. And if we only look to our treatment of the native peoples, the ghettoization of the Chinese, and the freed slaves who settled in Nova Scotia we will know it has always been a lie. We may not have the same systemic legacy of slavery as our neighbours to the south, but it would be unwise to assume that racism is not an historic and now growing social ill in Canada.

But the other part that draws my attention is the statistic about the religification of Canada. Immigrants have a significantly higher likelihood of holding religion at the center of their lives than Canadian born folks do, and that presents a specific problem.

Religions are culture bearing institutions. That is to say they are part and parcel of the culture in which they develop. Often cultural teachings falsely become religious teachings as the lines between religion and culture are blurred. So close to International Women's Day, it seems appropriate to mention women and religion as an example. It is useful on a couple of levels.

First we have all been horrified by the 'honour killings' of a few young women here in Canada. Essentially these women have been murdered by fathers, husbands or brothers exactly because they were trying to assimilate into Canadian culture. Fortunately these have been few and far between, and Canadian courts have responded with appropriate severity.

Many Canadians are uncomfortable with the question of the hijab or modesty dress of some Muslim women– a complex issue to be sure.

The defendants in the murder cases have leaned on so-called religious values that make men responsible for women's morality and honour. These ideas really have nothing to do with the teachings of their faiths. We real Canadians are shocked at such barbarity and ask how something so noble as religion can be used to justify the oppression of women? But we have a pretty big blind spot here.

We complain about these 'new' religions, and yet we still tolerate the fact that Roman Catholic women are denied ordination to the priesthood, that nuns of a generation ago were almost as covered as their Muslim sisters, that some Christian wedding ceremonies still expect the new wife to obey her husband, and that 10 MEN are needed before Jewish services can begin.

Religious intolerance of women is widespread...it's just that we have grown used to ignoring some of it and generally Canadian Jewish and Christian men don't kill on

religious grounds.

It brings into focus a critical question about freedom of religion in a secular society. Where does that freedom end? Are all beliefs really acceptable in Canada? What about the religious laws that descend from those beliefs? Are they okay? And can every cultural belief be justified as being 'religious'?

Apparently the answer is no. Ontario banned the Islamic Sharia courts several years ago, courts where things like marital disputes were settled. The reason was that Sharia law severely compromises the rights of women. What few noticed is that the same government decision also ended Jewish and Catholic religious courts that resolved marital disputes at the same time...less controversial, but often doing the same work.

And now Quebec has banned the niqab or headscarf in voting booths and certain public events. As Jean Charest said, "You have to know where to draw the line," between religious and secular rights. Many liberal Canadians thought that was going too far, especially from a National Assembly that still displays a Catholic crucifix as an 'historical artifact'.

Many in this country are advocating even harsher restrictions and fight vehemently against any multicultural concession like turbaned police officers, or people who wear the Sikh kirpan or ceremonial dagger.

The more moderate among us advocate for accommodation where possible and for a combination of education and appropriate use of Canadian law. In effect we (and I count myself among this number) hold that your rights to free speech and free thought end where my rights are threatened. Murder is murder. 'Honour' is neither an excuse nor should it be considered a mitigating circumstance. Advocation of one religion as right and true and supreme is also wrong.

There are few easy answers, and I could go on parsing the problem at some more length, but I won't. Here's my conclusion:

Canada is a secular society, but we are facing an increasing pressure as the passionate adherence to religious values grows in both immigrant and resident parts of our nation. There is a real and present threat that Canada will develop a new kind of separatism, not between French and English, but between the sacred (in many forms) and the secular.

In the face of that possibility I believe we are called upon to reach down and find that spiritual courage Barbara Wells described in our reading, the spiritual courage based in a knowledge that all people really are worthy of our respect. Those of us who have grown up with a respect for diversity will be the ones with the grounding to show the way. Some of us will be Unitarian and some will come from other traditions engaged in multifaith work. We – and our children- are the ones raised in the homes that honoured difference...just like those people who helped the Jewish refugees, just like the people who embraced the Negro rights movements in the 1960's.

It is part of our Principles. I fear we are going to have those Principles tested in the coming years.

I don't think that multiculturalism has failed, but neither has it fully succeeded. We must take steps now to get it back on course before the storm overwhelms us.