BEFORE, BEYOND AND UNDERNEATH MORAL PANICS: RELIGION AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE IN CANADA

Director of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society, University of Victoria, **Dr. Paul Bramadat** has written extensively on Canadian multiculturalism and immigration policies.

The moral panics that erupt every couple months in Canada and abroad about this or that religious issue distract us from the major things we might do through policies, elections, academic research, and agitation, to make things incrementally better for minorities. This essay focuses on two controversies — one about the cultural appropriation of yoga in BC and another about a student at York University who sought an exemption from a class requirement — that enable us to see more clearly some of the unfinished political, historical, and theoretical business in our society.

Les paniques morales qui éclatent tous les deux mois au Canada et à l'étranger au sujet de tel ou tel sujet religieux nous détournent des grandes choses que nous pourrions accomplir par le biais de politiques, d'élections, de recherche universitaire et d'activisme pour améliorer graduellement les choses pour les minorités. Cet article met l'accent sur deux controverses — la première portant sur l'appropriation culturelle du yoga en Colombie-Britannique et la deuxième sur un étudiant de l'Université York qui a demandé une dérogation à une exigence de cours — qui nous permettent de voir plus clairement certains éléments politiques, historiques et théoriques qui demeurent inachevés dans notre société.

The way religious clothing, practices, and claims get handled in the public arena depends very much on the location of that arena. Moreover, when one studies religious controversies one is never really, or simply, studying some discrete object out there. One is always, in fact, mainly studying the wide range of social forces in which so-called religious practices or claims are made, defended and contested.

I want to focus on two specific events that enable us to see some of the unfinished political, historical, and theoretical business in our society. The first story comes from my adopted province, British Columbia. In 2015, Premier Christy Clark announced that Vancouver's Burrard Street Bridge would be closing for a few hours in the morning on June 21 to host a one-hour yoga session, which would be the largest International Day of Yoga event outside of India.

Ms. Clark conceived of the event following a visit with India's Prime Minister, as a means of strengthening ties between Canada and India and celebrating International Day of Yoga with more than 100 other countries; the event would involve government and corporate cooperation – one of the main sponsors was, predictably, Lululemon.

In the weeks following the announcement, we witnessed a tsunami of protest and derision, among which the main vectors included:

• Many Indigenous commentators complained that by scheduling the event on National Aboriginal Day, yet again, the dominant society was overlooking their claims.

• Some activists protested the cultural appropriation associated with "postural yoga" that allegedly commodifies what some imagine to be an essentially Indian – or to some, Hindu – practice.

• Other citizens protested that the closure of the Burrard St. bridge would cost $150,000 in security and porta-potties; it would also disadvantage those who needed to take public transit to get to work, and might injure businesses that depend on traffic flow.

In defence of the early morning event, one organizer noted that it was never intended to take away from Aboriginal celebrations at Trout Lake, which would have taken place in a different part of the city long after the morning yoga class. Finally, the date was chosen by the Indian government for their own political and religious reasons, supported by the United Nations, and meant to coincide with the summer solstice. That is, the originators of the day had no interest in and probably no awareness of Canada's National Aboriginal Day.

Nonetheless, on-line media and call-in shows gave people plenty of chance to express their frustration over the event — its timing, its political implications, its crass commercialism. Weeks after the event arrived in the public arena, it was cancelled entirely. Here we had the perfect blank screen, and everyone projected their own concerns about provincial politics, inaction on Indigenous claims, cultural authenticity, post-colonialism, neo-liberalism, political opportunism, and Canadian identity.

YORK UNIVERSITY V. "MUHAMMAD"

Let us shift now to an event that unfolded mostly in Southern Ontario but that also involved the broader Canadian public arena. It unfolded roughly between about September 2013 and late March 2014.

A student — whose religious affiliation is *still unknown*, but to capture an almost immediate public consensus, we shall call "Muhammad" — registers for a sociological methods class at York University in Toronto. The on-line course includes one in-person "learning group" meeting in Toronto in which students are broken down into groups to discuss relevant themes.

The majority of the students are from the Toronto area, but a few are from farther afield. In at least one case, a student from overseas is granted an exemption from this component of the course. One day the course the instructor (Dr. Paul Grayson) receives an email from a student that reads:

> One of the main reasons that I have chosen Internet courses to complete my BA is due to my firm religious beliefs, and part of that is the intermingling between men and women. It will not be possible for me to meet in public with a group of women (the majority of my group) to complete some of these tasks. (Sept. 20, 2013)

Grayson seeks the advice of the dean and the director of the centre for human rights at York. At the same time, he also consults his peers in his department, and they decide not to allow Muhammad to miss this one class, citing their concern that his absence would "contribute to material or symbolic marginalizations of other students, faculty or teaching assistants." (Oct. 9, 2013)

So, the professor informs Muhammad that he is not able to grant the exemption. Those members of the public who were convinced that Muhammad was an intransigent Salafist might have been shocked when he replied:

> I cannot expect that everything will perfectly suit what I would consider an ideal situation. I will respect the final decision, and do my best to accommodate it. I thank you for the way you have handled this request, and I look forward to continuing in this course. (Oct 17, 2013)

Interestingly, Muhammad's impeccably cordial acceptance of the department's position had virtually no impact on the trajectory of the controversy. Moreover, while the department discussed this request, the university's provost, dean, and director of human rights had decided (on Oct. 18, 2013), after weeks of exchanges between Grayson and the vice dean, that Grayson must accommodate (or should have accommodated) Muhammad's request. In the end Grayson refuses.

The event gets ugly in January 2014 when the professor publishes an article in *University Affairs*, in which he provides an account both of the student's request and the university's demands that he grant the accommodation. Once the issue entered the public arena, virtually every Canadian news source picked up on it and the issue seemed to be everywhere on social media.

The political response was strangely unanimous. Ontario's Progressive Conservative Leader Tim Hudak said he supported Grayson and invoked his own family: "I think about my daughter going to university or college down the road."

Federal New Democratic Party leader Tom Mulcair commented: "I don't think a university should be accommodating such a demand…. The professor made the right call." Federal Liberal Member of Parliament Judy Sgro agreed: "It's nothing short of ridiculous…. We live in a country seeking gender

equality... This is Canada, pure and simple."

Perhaps the most tendentious public comment came from Conservative MP and Justice Minister Peter McKay: "We did not send soldiers to Afghanistan to protect the rights of women to only see those same rights eroded here at home," and "This is what we've tried to combat in places like Afghanistan." If Canadians were puzzled by the connection McKay saw between Muhammad's *politely issued and politely withdrawn* e-mail request and our military actions in Afghanistan, it led to no backlash. The fact that McKay's bizarre comment was not pilloried says something about the public consensus that had emerged by that time.

At least one Canadian scholar made an effort to contribute to the public conversation, and the furor his intervention created is quite instructive. David Seljak, a personal friend and professor of religious studies, was interviewed by several media outlets, including the National Post. He tried to situate the controversy in a larger political and historical context, and to tease apart the rhetorical threads that had become entangled in the weeks of public and political discourse. In other words, he did what he is trained to do as a scholar.

He noted that given the current practices, laws, and policies related to reasonable accommodation requests, it would be difficult to reject Muhammad's claim given that it seemed sincere and the harm it might have done was not significant. In response, hundreds of people offered their thoughts on the National Post's website. A significant hardening in the social meaning of Muhammad's request had already occurred, so the perspectives were rather nasty. One person suggested we might feed David to dogs.

KEY LESSONS FROM OM THE BRIDGE AND YORK

Both cases reflect the importance of place: the Om the Bridge controversy arguably could not have occurred in any other part of Canada – there is something about the peculiar geographical, cultural, and political features of what we call the Cascadia bio-region that give this event its specific flavor.

Yoga culture on the west coast is indicative of a broad openness to post-institutional spirituality. The province is home to about two times the number of people who tell pollsters they have "no religion" than the rest of Canada.

The cluster of alternative modes of religious and spiritual life in B.C. is coupled with the dramatically unfinished business of Indigenous politics. Relationships between Indigenous communities and settler society are less settled on the west coast than they are elsewhere (where treaties at least theoretically establish the terms of engagement). Also evident in this controversy is the effect of the province's rather idiosyncratic political culture.

I am not suggesting that yoga is not popular elsewhere or that the relationship between the federal and provincial governments and First Nations is rosy elsewhere. Rather, there is arguably a certain combination of these social forces that creates the perfect conditions for this controversy in BC.

The York controversy was also locally-inflected, in the sense that it included features of the university's well-known activist political climate, the economic pressures its faculty feel vis-a-vis an expanding administration, combined with some paranoia around the growing size of the Muslim community in the Greater Toronto Area. This makes the York case characteristic of that time and place.

Both cases reflect the distinction between "troubles" and "issues." The great sociologist, C.W. Mills observed that troubles are practical concerns that can often be managed at the local or even personal level (e.g., your neighbour's trees, or their son's loud music). Issues are linked to concerns about broader, even world, dilemmas (e.g., immigration, inflation, pollution, racism, liberalism).

In these two cases, we see troubles arising that might well have been resolved imperfectly, but quietly and practically. However due to local conditions, media amplification, and unresolved political grievances, these troubles erupted into full blown issues that seem to demand hyperbolic political posturing. Once these kinds of challenges escape the interpersonal arena and enter the public arena, all bets are off and pretty soon someone is going to be fed to the dogs.

Both cases reveal deeper anxieties and misgivings in the broader population with regard to the ways our society will, as it were, "manage" religious diversity in our sort-of-secular society.

The moral panics that erupt every couple months in Canada and abroad about this or that religious issue reveal things we would rather not admit, but really should think about more carefully. Nonetheless, these events also distract us from thinking and talking about the small things we do — without fanfare — in our schools, on our streets, in businesses, and in governments, to ensure that newcomers, religious and non-religious folk, liberals, conservatives, LGBTQ people, settlers and long-settled people can, more or less, and with notable exceptions, get along.