INTERVIEW WITH PATRICE BRODEUR

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Developments on the world stage in recent years require better understanding of the role of religion and faith-based communities in public discourse in Canada. What approaches and strategies could be used to engage faith-based communities, foster public awareness, and combat religious discrimination?

Religion, like many other identity markers and concepts, can be the source from which one can convincingly legitimate human behaviour of all kinds, from the worst violence to the greatest peace. In an interdependent world, religion plays as much a role in public life as does any other form of identity such as ethnicity, language, race, social class, or gender, to name but a few. Treating religion differently and expecting to keep religion in the private sphere – according to the dominant secular discourse within Canada but also within much of the international community – can lead to feelings of exclusions or of being unfairly singled out. Such emotions contribute to a growing radicalization expressed in the form of victimization and oppression, real or perceived, to oneself or to one's community in general. It is therefore crucial to work, intellectually and spiritually, to integrate religion into not only public discourse but also into public life of all sectors, from education to the work place. What do I mean? Simply replace the word "religion" with "ethnicity" or "gender" or "physically handicapped", and you will get the picture. In fact, much of the life of most faith-based communities is already engaged constructively in all aspects of public discourse in Canada, from health to politics to education. It is a question of expanding those practices by enlarging all tables where discussions on any aspect of public concern take place to include a wider variety of identity groups, including religious, ethnic, racial, social class, etc. By treating religious markers as any other identity markers and insuring full participation around the tables of public decision-making ensures the necessary long term integration for all communities, whatever the basis of their association might be. Social cohesion depends on this principle of non-exclusion, or written positively, of constantly seeking inclusion of all parties directly affected in any given matter.

In a nutshell, the problem is not with "religion" or with "segments of religions", but with a simplistic understanding of secularism as necessarily demanding a privatization of religious beliefs and practices. While I strongly believe that no religious group can impose its agenda in the political realm, nor can any other identity group, including ideological groups. It is too easy to scapegoat religion today, as a way to blind citizens of much more urgent dangers linked to concentration of power, as in the economic and military realms. Therein resides the real challenge today: in order to ensure a greater practice of equitable and sustainable pluralism in all spheres of life, how do we expand the diversity of ideological perspectives within the various levels of the Canadian political system? By expanding our decision-making tables and following the principle of promoting ever greater diversity and inclusion, many forms of discrimination will be reduced, not only religious discriminations.

Demographic projections show noticeable growth in some religions in Canada. What impact could this growth have on economic, social and political integration?

The impact will depend on how well the process of inclusion (or exclusion) takes place in the next few years. This impact will be minimal for those immigrants that truly integrate into the social fabric – with successful integration first requiring professional insertion. However, the nature of immigrants' economic, social, and political behaviour may change to reflect local concentrations of certain identity groups. There is nothing new in these social processes, whether the changes apply to language or ethnic or religious sensitivities.

What are the implications, if any, of religious diversity on policy developments in Canada?

True inclusion of religious diversity should enrich Canadian policies, both at home and abroad, if it first takes place in the education realm. This can be accomplished through the academic teaching about religion, especially in the formal schooling system, but also through specific add campaigns to educate the public about respect for religious diversity, best presented through campaigns about diversity in general.

Is there religious extremism in Canada and what are the manifestations? What is its impact, if any, on the future of Canada?

Religious extremism exists depending on how "extremism" is defined. First, it is important not to reduce "extremism" to "terrorism", which is a very small sub-set of the first as far as Canada is concerned. One can be an extremist in one's views without having any bearing on violent behaviour. In this respect, religious motivations promoting violence in Canada is probably minimal and no more important than any other motivational sources, although I lack the statistics to prove this point. Second, to the extent that accommodations of all kinds are made by common citizens to facilitate respect for our often very real differences in perspectives and real efforts to find mutually agreeable solutions are made, the levels of violent religious extremism (or other forms) will remain extremely low.

What factors lead to Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, and religious intolerance in general?

Any form of exclusion and negative judgement can lead to intolerance of any kind. There are different patterns of social domination and marginalization in various regions of the world, as well as within Canada. Sharing our different perceptions of local, national, and transnational histories is an essential prerequisite to begin to take responsibility, in different ways for the various communities, for past injustices that many people to this day feel victimized by. The reproductive patterns of identity dynamics lead to tensions and conflicts that persist over generations, unless those historical heritages are purified of that which often causes emotional resentment and feelings of revenge against historic enemies.

What is the place of religious issues in education and school curricula, media coverage, public opinion, and the separate school boards?

The above principles of respect, inclusion and equity remain especially relevant in all educational spaces. In fact, the question is not so much what is the place or the role of religion in education, but rather, what do various worldviews (religious or not) contribute to the process of educating respectful and inter-dependent global citizens. The new program in Ethic and Religious Culture that is currently under experimentation in a few Quebec schools, and that will become mandatory from September 2008 onwards, is an excellent example of a constructive approach that seeks to integrate all kinds of religious and non-religious identities and perspectives, while grounding students ethically and informing them about the rich diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews. At its heart lies the aim of educating all persons to practice an inter-worldview dialogue approach that will hopefully, in time, help us all transcend the Enlightenment heritage that is too often dichotomized as the "secular" versus the "religious". By developing an inter-worldview approach to the teaching of ethic and religious culture, this program is taking a bold new step in the direction of a new paradigm shift towards greater inclusion and respect for all the identities and perspectives which make up the rich diversity of those human beings living in Canada at the moment.