RELIGIOUS EXCLUSION

The "Otherness" Discourse and the Need for an Inclusive Social Debate on our Core Multicultural Values

Marion Boyd

Marion Boyd is Former Attorney General of Ontario and author of the 2004 review of religious arbitration in Ontario, Dispute Resolution in Family Law: Protecting Choice, Promoting Inclusion.

ABSTRACT

Having a national discussion on the role of religion in Canada is potentially a positive step. However, unless the discussion is respectful in tone and focuses on inclusion, taking account of differences, rather than exclusion based on differences, it may foster dissension and cast one religion, Islam, as the "Other." Those who value freedom of religion as a basic right in Canada must recognize it as a universal, not a selective right, and one which requires diligent effort on the part of both religious leaders and governments to make it a reality.

The author answers the following questions on the topic of Religion:

1) 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?
2) Demographic projections show noticeable growth in some religions in Canada. What impact could this growth have on economic, social and political integration?
3) What are the implications, if any, of religious diversity on policy developments in Canada?
4) Is there religious extremism in Canada and what are the manifestations? What is its impact, if any, on the future of Canada?
5) What factors lead to Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, and religious intolerance in general?
6) What is the place of religious issues in education and school curricula, media coverage, public opinion, and the separate school boards?

After many years, when the topic of religion was virtually banned from public discourse and popular academic study by the prevalent emphasis on secular values, discussion of the role of religion in the political, economic and social lives of Canadians is suddenly fashionable and urgent. I contend that it is high time that we explore the role of religion in the development of our country and make conscious decisions to guide the evolution of future public policy.

Historically and sociologically, religion has played a major role in fashioning Canada as we know it, admittedly not always in the most positive way. We tend to overlook the consequences of the vicious sectoral conflicts between Catholics and Protestants in past centuries, or the result of concerted efforts through missions and residential schools to suppress the beliefs of First Nations peoples. Constitutionally, we have acknowledged and enshrined support for multiculturalism and freedom of religion, including the concept of freedom from religion. We institutionalized these values primarily as a result of our pragmatic recognition that we are a largely immigrant society made up of many peoples and beliefs; we needed a framework in which to accommodate diversity. Seldom do we pause to examine the extent to which we, as a nation, have internalized these stated values. Almost never do we acknowledge that the values themselves are rooted in the religious beliefs dominant among Canadians. It is time for a healthy and respectful dialogue about the role of religion and secularism in Canada. Such a discussion could be an engaging and productive way for us to build better understanding of the various beliefs among our citizens and communities and to decide how to embody the values we have articulated. But is that the direction the discussion is taking?

The discourse as it has evolved to date is not particularly fruitful, especially in the popular news media. Stories of the conflict in the Middle East or Africa emphasize that religious differences underlie the factionalism and hostility between opposing groups, but seldom analyze how religious beliefs interface with other critical factors, such as economics, culture and history. Concerns about terrorism focus primarily on an assumption that all terrorists are religious fanatics and their religion is the only impetus for their actions. There is little or no mention of the role of social and/or economic exclusion which influences extreme behaviour. Media commentators seek out spokespeople from selected religious groups to "explain," usually in a few brief words, what their religion consists of and why it is important to their community. Seldom is this question asked of mainstream Protestants or Catholics, who continue to form the majority of religious Canadians.

Certain faith communities are challenged to defend their beliefs and prove that, despite their religion, they are worthy citizens of this country; these are not questions posed to mainstream religious groups. The story seldom points out that Judaism, Christianity and Islam share the same Abrahamic tradition. As a result, the impression that is given is that religion is only a factor if it is the religion of an existential "Other." And the "Other" in the western world today is Islam, just as the "Other" was Judaism in the first half of the 20th century in Germany.

In Canada, as in much of the rest of the world, Islam is the fastest growing religion. As the number of Muslims grows, apprehension about "Otherness" also grows, particularly given the sharp decline in mainstream organized religions and the growing influence of secularism. Islam is gaining not just in numbers but also in economic and political influence, both in Canada and in the world as a whole. There is no doubting the economic power of Islamic states which possess vast oil and gas resources, desperately needed by the rest of the world. Nor can there be any illusion that the deliberate political efforts to characterize Muslims as the "other" are not intrinsically tied to the economic and political ambitions of the United States, France, Russia and others.

Power politics is just as evident in local communities as it is on the international stage. As a minority religious group increases in size and influence, apprehension about "Otherness" is magnified and those who have been dominant in the past seek to limit that expansion. It is an old political ploy to isolate the enemy, to make him seem less than human, to subject him to ridicule and oppression, and to make him the object of unreasoning fear, so that no one defends him rights when they are threatened. There are ominous signs in the case of the anti-terrorism laws, complaints about religious garb or the "codes of conduct" adopted gratuitously by small hamlets, for example, that ordinary Canadians may be falling into the trap of seeing their Muslim neighbours as the "Other."

Many of us in Canada are woefully ignorant about religion. In our zeal to avoid trampling on the religious freedoms of others, we offer little public education about religions in general and encourage the isolation of specific religions in separate and private schools. By relegating education about religion to faith communities or separate and private school delivery, we are encouraging the teaching of specific tenets of faith in isolation, where children may receive no knowledge of and learn no respect for the beliefs of others. By teaching nothing of the role of religion in the public education system, we create a generation of children who cannot understand the influence of religion, either historically or contemporaneously. I often think with deep regret of a wonderful multi-faith curriculum that was developed in Ontario in the late 1980's to accord with the principles of the Constitution and yet, still allow all students to learn about the diverse beliefs of the major world religions and how their values have common roots in concepts of peace, equality, and justice. It was never implemented in our schools or communities and we desperately need such a program to help rebuild our commitment to freedom of religion and multiculturalism.

Ignorance is always a rich seeding bed for prejudice. As much of the public commentary post 9/11 demonstrates, discrimination and hatred thrive on lack of knowledge and empathy, successfully defining the "Other" as evil always depends on ignorance. We need a meaningful dialogue in the education sector about how to counter ignorance of religions in general without castigating, promoting or enforcing any particular religious faith. We need to acknowledge that individuals who have religious faith of any sort, as well as those who oppose religion on principle, have often used their beliefs to justify violent actions. We have only to consider the Crusades, the Holocaust, Apartheid, the Cultural Revolution and the daily bombing of Sunnis by Shia and Shia by Sunnis to realize that such actions have been justified by all forms of religion. We need to give citizens the knowledge to analyze why only certain aspects of a religion might be seized upon to justify violence, when the basic teachings of the religion promote peace, equality and justice, and to question the impact social, economic and political exclusion have on religious interpretation and activities. We must also be prepared to examine what consequences might flow if secularism were to become the dominant belief structure should religion wane in importance.

As Canadians, we have adopted a public policy approach to organize political and legal institutions around inclusion which takes account of differences, rather than exclusion based on differences. Governments should scrutinize every piece of legislation, every policy and every program to ensure that support for the inclusion of all identified groups, which also takes appropriate account of differences, is actualized in our country. Not just religious groups, but the dominant majority of Canadians, must be prepared to consider whether supposedly neutral laws or policies impact differentially when the protected grounds under Section 15 of the Constitution, including religion, are taken into account. If so, we have an obligation to advocate for equitable treatment for all. All religions must recognize that, if the inclusion of one religious group is jeopardized, the inclusion of all could be in question. Governments under pressure have begun to be more attentive to inclusion with regard to sex and race, but they deal less effectively with religion – we cannot condone our governments' picking and choosing among the protected grounds because one ground is more politically controversial than another.

Religious, civic and government leaders must work together to foster public awareness and to engage in meaningful debate about multiculturalism, secularism and freedom of religion in our society. If we have the courage to do so, I have no doubt that we will deepen our commitment to inclusion and stop the politics of "Otherness". But if the debate does not occur, ignorance and fear may erode our core values and jeopardize our Charter commitments.