JOURNALISM ON CHURCH STREET

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Institutional religious communities are changing, and so too is journalism. Technology, economic drivers and demographic influences are behind much of this evolution. But to discount either religion or journalism as continuing forces in public life is to ignore not just their current presence but also their long histories in Canadian society. This essay looks at one small city block within a downtown Toronto university campus, suggesting that the ways in which media and religion continue to be tangible serve also as metaphors for journalism in its role as public square.

Les communautés religieuses institutionnelles changent, tout comme le journalisme. La technologie, les moteurs économiques et les influences démographiques expliquent une grande partie de cette évolution. Mais ignorer la religion ou le journalisme en tant que forces permanentes dans la vie publique, c'est ignorer non seulement leur présence actuelle, mais aussi leur longue histoire dans la société canadienne. Cet article se penche sur un petit pâté de maisons dans un campus universitaire du centre-ville de Toronto, et suggère que les façons dont les médias et la religion continuent d'être pertinents servent également de métaphores pour le journalisme dans son rôle de place publique.

Ryerson University, home to a journalism program for more than 60 years, sits squarely in downtown Toronto. It began as a polytechnic, primarily serving the needs of post World War II veterans. Unlike the University of Toronto, its older cousin to the west, Ryerson has always been a secular, public institution. This is a university where with the exception of Indigenous spiritual supports, there is no official, on-campus chaplaincy. Yet this is still an institution steeped in religious traditions and practices.

Physical space can suggest ways in which journalism defines, mediates, and even evolves our concepts of religion, secularism and public policy in Canada.

On Gould Street, the "main street" of campus, stands a statue of the university's namesake, Egerton Ryerson, a Methodist minister who was a key figure in the creation of the public school system in Ontario. His opinions on the education of Indigenous peoples – that they should be made into "industrious farmers, and that learning is provided for and pursued only so far as it will contribute to that end" — has been cited as foundational for the residential school system (Ryerson 1847, p 74). During the summer of 2017, his statue was flanked by photographs by Shelley Niro, the Mohawk artist. Her images were of monuments and historical plaques as well as landscapes, which she described as Battlefields of her Ancestors.

Around the corner on Bond Street are two churches: St. George's Greek Orthodox Church, the oldest such community in Canada. The building itself, however, was first the

Holy Blossom synagogue. In somewhat stark contrast across the street is the First Evangelical Lutheran church, again, the oldest Lutheran community in Toronto. Now brick rather than wood, it is in the same spot as originally built by its German founders. Both churches have active congregations.

At the end of this short stretch of Bond Street, on the second floor above a halal café and a store selling jeans, is the Sheikh Deedat Centre, a small mosque. Coming back up the block on Church Street, it's easy to catch sight of the spires of St. Michael's Cathedral Basilica (the seat of the Catholic archdiocese), and of the Metropolitan United Church (once Metropolitan Wesleyan Methodist Church).

But buildings are only the most recognizable faces of institutional religion — also the most easily reported on by journalists. For example, at the southwest corner of Church and Gould streets is Oakham House. The gothic revival building was completed in 1848 as a private home for the architect of St. Michael's Cathedral. But in its current incarnation as the Ryerson Student Centre, it contains a multi-faith prayer space on the third floor, most heavily used by Muslims on campus. There's no evidence of this space from the exterior (or even the interior ground floor of the building), but campus media coverage of its planning and continued use has made it known to the community.

Journalism, whether on campus or on national airwaves, remains the public square or sphere for our Canadian discussion of religion as experienced in the so-called secular state. It is the way in which we engage with traditions known and unknown; surveys have found that Canadians of many backgrounds rely on mainstream media not only for news about other traditions but also their own (Smith 2008).

Journalism is also the place where we have the chance to hash out policy: for example, the debates in the lead up to same-sex marriage becoming legal in Canada. The first such marriages took place in January 2001 at the Metropolitan Community Church of Toronto, not far southeast from campus. Even without a personal invite to the weddings, Canadians were part of the proceedings as the ceremony was broadcast live on CBC TV.

Take another spin around the same campus block, and again see the statue of Ryerson, but this time please note that he was also the founding editor of the weekly Christian Guardian, established in 1829, Canada's first denominational newspaper. In the same year, he obtained a licence for a printing press, which became Ryerson Press (since folded into McGraw-Hill).

Across from the statue is one of several popular coffee shops on campus. Juergen Habermas identified coffee shops as an important part of the creation of a public sphere, sitting outside of government and other institutions, allowing for discussion of common issues (Smith 2008). Inside are students and faculty busy on their digital devices, accessing and creating information, some of it news. Next door is the Ryerson Image Centre, host to collections of photojournalism, including Indigenous and other rituals.

Media, including journalism, are physically intertwined with religion, again, just in this small block of our campus.

But what of all the religious and spiritual practices and beliefs which are not so identifiable? Continuing this meditation on the physical world, consider the buried rivers of Toronto, including Taddle Creek, passing under land close to Ryerson. Despite being covered over, sometimes relegated to sewer status, they continue to flow. There are attempts to recognize these currents, either by "daylighting," literally excavating the creeks to bring them once again to the surface, or at least by marking their paths above ground using trails and maps. Journalism does this too in a number of ways. First, reporting provides archival treasures. It's possible to go back and envision past ideas and practices if they have been captured accurately. But daylighting also means acknowledging beliefs and practices that for a variety of reasons have been marginalized or subjected to attempts at extinction. I think particularly of Indigenous traditions. The current response among journalists to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in telling stories about Indigenous peoples, including their spiritual lives, is heartening.

Daylighting is also an important metaphor for recognizing the way in which the language, the tropes, the frames that are deployed by journalists, continue to draw on buried religious traditions that have and continue to influence our society. Ideas of pilgrimage, of miracles, meccas, saints and rituals pervade what would seem at first glance to be banal reportage.

Finally, storytelling may well be the way in which we collectively identify and perhaps even create a sense of the new spiritual possibilities in a diverse Canada. The percentage of Canadians who are religious "nones" is growing, but we know this number includes more than atheists. The grouping is complex and subtle, so the reporting of cultural, artistic endeavours, the storytelling of everyday life, are ways in which journalism not only records but creates a public space for the identification, validation, and challenge of religious ideas.

How important is it that journalism continues to fulfill these roles! It has been a long time now since most major Canadian outlets have had religion specialists in newsrooms. And yet, any content analysis will quickly show just how much religion is in the daily news cycle: conflict, foreign affairs, health and science, ethics, politics of all types.

Like the changing importance of traditional brick and mortar places of worship, journalism is moving, inexorably, from tangible print to digital dissemination. But its intangible nature,

flashing across handheld screens, makes it simultaneously more visible. And images, and discussions of religion as lived in real public space continue to count.

The cover story for the summer 2009 edition of the Ryerson Review of Journalism critiqued the role reporting played in the accommodation debate in the province of Quebec (Tobolka 2009). Eve Tobolka described the coverage of the Montreal Du Parc YMCA window controversy. Hasidic schoolboys across the alley from the Y were apparently a little too interested in watching women doing yoga, so the synagogue paid for frosted windows to be installed in the Y. Tobolka describes how the initial story, written by arts journalist Sylvie St-Jacques, also a member of the Y, ran on the front page of La Presse, Nov. 7, 2006. Tobolka writes:

> The prominent headline read "*Cachez ce short qu'on ne saurait voir*" (Hide your shorts because we don't want to see them). The piece generated more than 600 letters and e-mails. The story about four windows in a smallish YMCA then ran on local newscasts and dominated talk radio. Soon it seeped onto the airwaves and into the pages of papers across the country: CTV, CBC Radio, *The Vancouver Sun*, *The Globe and Mail*, The *Winnipeg Free Press*, *The Guardian* in Charlottetown. (Tobolka 2009)

Describing this as well as other similar stories which followed, Tobolka wrote: "Were the media just doing their job or are they guilty of irresponsibly hyping the issue?"

Given the more recent news of the Quebec government's introduction of Bill 62 (banning niqab-wearing women from receiving public services), it is important to see how the reporting of this "act to foster adherence to state religious neutrality" is handled. Within 24 hours of its introduction, many noted the use of photos of niqab-wearing women from as far afield as Austria, or places unidentified, being run as illustrations for this Quebec story, as if one could interchange images of people for any other news story (Iqbal 2017). Here is a prime example of the way in which journalism serves as the public sphere where a policy affecting religion in secular, public spaces is being described and responded to. How important that the communication of the issues, and the reality of religious dress and practice in Quebec, be accurately reported.

A Ryerson campus tour wouldn't be complete without a visit to the Rogers Communications Centre, which houses the School of Journalism, among other communications-based programs. The building features a number of labs and classrooms as well as offices. But one of my favourite elements is the entrance atrium. Above street level and looking south, is an unobstructed view of the Anglican St. James Cathedral, staring right back. When the building was being planned, a resident north of the Centre apparently fought to have his view of St. James preserved, hence the see-through atrium. It's a tangible reminder of the idea of architectural communication between the journalistic and religious elements of this city, the visible and the invisible, and all that those connections mean to understanding our common public life.

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