SPEAK OUT AGAINST BIGOTRY

An exchange

Audience member: The media have taken a 'Fox News' approach to religion in this country. It goes well beyond the excuse that the media don't any more have resources. It's galling to see the vile, poisonous coverage being (justified) in the name of freedom of speech. Is there anything you can say about what has happened to civil discourse in Canada? How do we move forward, regardless of the minority that is being demonized at this point?

Joyce Smith: One of the things that I think would immediately improve coverage of every kind of religion in the public sphere is to have specialist reporters. In terms of the coverage being 'poisoned,' one of the reasons is that at the moment, religion is always covered through the lens of something else — it's someone covering politics, or it's someone covering a war, or someone covering the education system or whatever else. So it's always seen through that lens that's sort of hyphenated. And we never really get a chance to hear stories about religion on its own terms. So I think just that alone would improve things, to some extent.

We need people who are specialists who can sit in newsrooms and help to advise the people who are on those other beats and say, 'Actually, you're just about to walk into a big trap — be careful. You should know a, b, and c about these people, this behaviour, this dress, or whatever before you do that story.' That's my quick take on that one.

Lori Beaman: Paul was talking about feeding (University of Waterloo Professor) David Seljack to the dogs for his comments. But we also participate in this by not calling it out, and say, 'Wait a minute.' As citizens, we share a responsibility to say, 'This is not acceptable. We need a higher quality of discourse.' Each and every person has a responsibility as a citizen or a participant in public dialogue to both keep the level of dialogue and discourse at a particular level, and to encourage others to do so. And I think that's not just the responsibility of journalists.

Paul Bramadat: One of the problems — and Lori and I have talked about this many times — that many of us in Religious Studies have is, what should our role be in approaching a media story which we consider to be problematic or biased? It's not clear to me that our role should be to replace one essentialism with another. If there's some story that's based on some assumption that Islam is violent or misogynist, it's not clear to me that the way to respond to that is to say, 'No, no, no – actually Islam is egalitarian and absolutely pacifistic.' Our job is to figure out 'What are the various social forces that went into making that initial claim?' and leave it at that. Activists and advocates, it's their job to have kind of a horse in the race on that particular question. It's not my job.

Audience member: I was wondering if you might be able to say a little bit more about the "nones," because in my experience (I work a lot within the Buddhist community and have been many years working in the newcomer settlement sector), many people choose not to identify as a faith.

Many Buddhists choose to say 'none of the above,' because

it's safer. In fact, in settlement contexts, people are unfortunately encouraged to do so, in some ways — in the same way as adopting a European-sounding name. It's a way of making oneself invisible, in light of the systemic oppression.

Bramadat: The category of the 'nones' is something we all debate quite a bit. The problem is that it's become this catch-all term — we don't know if it is a transitional term for some people, that they were brought up as Catholic or Jewish or Buddhist or Muslim, and right now they're in their 40s or their 20s and they're not really sure what they are, so they'll say 'none.' Or is it more like a permanent category for many people — or that they just don't care?

And then you have the additional dilemma of the large number of Chinese-Canadians who will say 'none,' even though if you actually followed them around — if that wasn't stalking — and they participated in ancestral worship and they have all kinds of practices in their everyday life which sure look a lot like religion. But they said 'none' to a survey-taker — there are over a million people of Chinese background, so that does tend to skew the data considerably.

And Buddhists, especially what we'd call non-ethnic Buddhists — in other words, white Buddhists, often called 'bookstore Buddhists' — will often say, 'Well, no, Buddhism's not a religion — it's a philosophy, it's a spirituality, it's a meditative practice. Don't call it religion — that's a bad word.' When it comes to a survey, they'll say 'none.' Even though, again, if you follow them around and you watch how they think about their yoga practice, how they think about death, how they think about suffering, it sure looks Buddhist to me.

Beaman: We get into this problem of what I call 'the will to religion' and the tricky business of trying not to push people into identity corners at the same time as allowing them the space to be who they are. And that's a really difficult thing to do. And that's one of the reasons I say we don't really know what's happening in the 'none' category.

My desire is to not say that 'they're really this, or they're really that,' but to think about the complexity of this category, how and why are people self-describing as 'none.'

Many of the people I've interviewed who are older women — not the generation usually thought of as being 'nones' — self-describe themselves as non-religious. But when you take that apart, they'll talk about having had some kind of a religious upbringing, they'll have abandoned that religious upbringing, then they'll say, 'And now I'm influenced by Indigenous spiritualities, I've learned a bit from Buddhism, and…"