RE-VISIONING RELIGION IN THE CONTEMPORARY PERIOD

The United Church of Canada's Ethnic Ministries Unit

ABSTRACT

In western societies, there is a tendency to ignore religion until it (or one of its self-designated representatives) causes trouble. This article addresses both the reasons for this tendency to "fetishize" destructive forms of religion, as well as some of the constructive practical and political expressions of religiosity. The case study Paul Bramadat has chosen is the Ethnic Ministries Unit of the United Church of Canada, a group that has much to teach us about the possible place of religion in our world

After many decades of accepting specious arguments about the dismal future for religion, many people in western societies are just now beginning to come to terms with the reality that religion has become – in fact always has been – one of the most significant features of contemporary national and international life. No longer can any scholar, policy-maker, non-governmental organization representative, or even any person-on-the-street credibly claim to be well informed without knowing something about religion, especially its involvement in some of the most complex and seemingly intractable problems in our world (Biles and Ibrahim 2005; Bramadat and Seljak 2005; Kymlicka 2003).

However, the particular kind of attention religion does get these days is quite problematic. The tendency in our society is to ignore religion only until some religious individual or group behaves, well, rather badly. In response to this pattern, this magazine and this article address some of the constructive practical and political expressions of religiosity. The case study I have chosen is the Ethnic Ministries Unit of the United Church of Canada, a group that has much to teach us about the possible place of religion in our world. By way of an introduction to this group and this essay, I would like to reflect briefly on the current backdrop against which religious discourse occurs in our society.

After many people recognize that they (we) had for too long relegated serious discussions about religion to the margins of public discourse, the problem looms large: if fairly substantial (perhaps even increasing) numbers of people organize themselves around atavistic, totalitarian, or apocalyptic religious convictions and communities, and if these groups can and do win the support of literate people within democracies, then are we not indeed headed for another dark age, as some of our sages (Jacobs 2004) fear? These concerns are rooted in reality. My own sense is that those who do not share at least some of these worries about the effect of religion in contemporary society ought to pay closer attention to the claims of people who act sincerely and rationally in accordance with explicitly religious values many members of liberal democracies happen to think of as anti-modern (Bramadat 2000; Jurgensmeyer 2002; Lincoln 2002). The problem is not just that such groups exist or that they are powerful (though of course both of these facts are in themselves problems), but rather that many of us tend to fetishize these kinds of actions and actors, and in so doing tend to have a difficult time understanding them in their proper context.

The nearly exclusive focus on violent or otherwise aggressive forms of religion is partly the fault of sensationalized and discriminatory media coverage of admittedly cataclysmic events such as September 11th 2001 (Karim 2003; Said 1997); partly the fault of a neo-conservative political juggernaut in the United States; partly the fault of the still powerful grip of the secularization hypothesis (Swatos 1999); and partly the fault of the deep and ancient human tendency to demonize another group or individual as a means of organizing and establishing one's place in the world (Pagels 1988). Of course, this provides some context for, but does not excuse, our tendencies to allow ourselves to be guided by highly questionable assumptions about religious and ethnic communities.

The media, political, and public fetishization of religiously inspired violence, chauvinism, and imperialism, has regrettably obscured the formidable efforts of millions of tireless religious individuals and communities devoted to justice, non-violence, and benevolence. Numerically, such people probably represent the majority of the religiously motivated actors in the world (though it must be said that there is no way to confirm this). I mention this not to suggest – as one is expected to suggest these days – that these more "progressive" individuals and the groups they form represent the

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"true" face of religion; such a claim would deny both the historical record of diversity within each tradition, and the agency and coherent reasoning of those committed to worldviews that many people (myself included) abhor.[1] I mention this simply to foster a more balanced account of religion in our historical period.

Such a re-balancing of our public discourse with respect to religion is necessary because one still hears the claim that the other-worldly, patriarchal, authoritarian, etc., logic that many people assume to be the foundations of all religions (and religious people) stands in opposition to the lofty goals of modernity. Such a criticism presupposes that the so-called political Islam of Osama bin Laden (and millions of Muslims), the political Christianity of George Bush (and millions of Christians) and the political Hinduism of India's Bharatiya Janta Party (and millions of Hindus) somehow accurately represent the larger traditions to which these groups – one must say, legitimately – belong. Interestingly, though, one rarely hears people dismiss the social value and efficacy of liberal democracy *in toto* just because of the electoral ambiguities (to put it mildly) of the 2000 U.S. election, the sponsorship scandal in Canada, or the many upheavals in the Italian and Ukrainian political systems. The same kind of practical moral heterogeneity that is accepted (or at least tolerated) in political, ideological, and economic movements, is thought to be completely incommensurate with religious movements.

What is often overlooked is the fact that many religious communities are involved in positive social change (meaning, social action oriented towards the improvement of humankind irrespective of ethnic or religious identity). This list may be obvious, but it is worth consideration, nonetheless: Salvation Army soup kitchens; religious groups and coalitions aimed at reducing ethnoracial discrimination against themselves and other groups (B'nai B'rith, CAIR-CAN); the Mennonite Central Committee's non-proselytizing relief efforts in impoverished regions; many groups' mobilization in the 1980s to protest apartheid in South Africa and military dictatorships in Central and South America; the role of religious commu-nities in the settlement of refugees (Beiser 1999; McLellan 1999); not to mention most recently the massive, global, and often faith-based generosity shown in wake of the tsunami of December 2004 and hurricane Katrina in September 2005. To remain silent about such efforts, especially in light of the volume (in both senses of the word) of the often quite paranoid rhetoric in public discourse, just contributes to the invisibility of the more progressive individuals and groups.

In order to promote a more nuanced discussion of religion in our intellectual discourse, in the rest of this essay I would like to discuss briefly an example of a religious community that is making an effort to engage one of the great challenges and opportunities in the contemporary metropolis – ethnic diversity – in a creative manner.

The tendency in our society is to ignore religion only until some religious individual or group behaves, well, rather badly.

The United Church of Canada is the largest Protestant denomination in Canada, with roughly 2.8 million adherents.[2] It originated in a 1925 merger between Canadian Methodists, Congregationalists, about 70 per cent of the Presbyterians, and the small General Council of Union Churches. So, it began in a practical compromise between related Protestant denominations, and aimed to serve the broad base of the mainline Protestant world by developing theologies and structures that would appeal to a wide Canadian audience. While it does not represent nearly as substantial a segment of the overall Protestant religious "market share" as it did in the past, its place in the Canadian religious scene is still significant (see Bibby 2002; 1993; 1987).

Given its denominational roots, it is not surprising that the overwhelming majority of its members during the 20th Century were white Europeans of largely British origin. Nonetheless, for many decades (and in some cases from the very beginning of its mandate), the church has included many almost exclusively Asian and Black West Indiancongregations. However, many members from these minority congregations felt excluded from the mainstream of this denomination. Denominational leaders responded to these experiences of exclusion at the 29th General Council meeting in 1982 by adopting reports that affirmed the value of ethnic diversity within the church. Before and after this important first formal acknowledgement, ethnic minorities struggled to express their complaints of exclusion from the larger structure, and also sought to find ways during these years to contribute their voices to the broader denominational discourse. In 1996, the Church created the Ethnic Ministries Council (now called the Ethnic Ministries Unit (EMU)) to address the denomination's shortcomings with respect to its acceptance of diversity.[3]

The EMU's official mission statement (developed in 1998 and revised in 2000) is: "To nurture and support the ministries of Ethnic Ministries congregations and ethnic minorities of The United Church of Canada to participate fully and faithfully in the Church's life and mission as a developing, growing, and gifted presence." Working to achieve the unit's objectives are 59 member congregations, 24 elected members of the unit-wide committee, six conference ethnic ministries committees, and six paid staff members. The member congregations represent a wide variety of ethnicities, although the four principle sub-units or associations represent Filipinos, Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans; a fifth "coalition" of congregations includes communities in which African, Armenian, Caribbean, Finnish, Ghanaian, Hungarian, Italian, Taiwanese, Ugandan, and Welsh Christians are the majority populations. Inaddition to providing support for almost exclusively ethnic minority congregations (Koreans, Japanese, etc.), the unit also seeks ways to improve the integration of ethnic minority individuals within predominately white (and European) congregations. Clearly, the EMU reflects the increasing diversity in the United

Church of Canada. Moreover, it addresses that ethnic diversity in an explicit manner that openly and critically acknowledges the white privilege that has been woven into the fabric of Canadian Christianity for centuries and the United Church for its entire history.

A critic might see the EMU as an attempt to reach out – after decades of neglect, according to the EMU's own common narrative – to its ethnic margins, mainly to stop or slow down the decline in membership and identification. Such a critic might point out that, like other Protestant denominations, the United Church is facing quite troubling declines in membership and identification. Between 1991 and 2001, the numbers of Canadians who identified themselves on the Canadian census as United Church Christians fell by 8.2 per cent (other Protestant declines were: 7 per cent for Anglicans, 35 per cent for Presbyterians, 4.7 per cent for Lutherans). Although the United Church remains the largest Canadian Protestant denomination by a fairly wide margin (the next largest deno-mination is the Anglican Church, with 800,000 fewer adherents), its leadership cannot help but feel discouraged by the recent census findings, which simply confirm the continuation of a pattern of decline that is decades old (Bibby 1993; 1987). One might argue that the EMU is simply a way to delay that decline.

Other critics might wonder whether or not the larger church might see the EMU as an expedient way to get ethnic congregations to accept the denomination's controversial positions on feminism, same sex marriage, or the ordination of gays and lesbians. Many ethnic congregations are uncomfortable with these changes and the EMU could serve as a means of imposing the values of the liberal leadership on more conservative members. The discourse common within the EMU is that the unit is both a) helping the church to better address the spiritual needs of its ethnic minority adherents (those in ethnic minority congregations and those in mixed or mainstream (i.e., white) congregations), and b) helping to cultivate a profound, systemic, denomination-wide integration and appreciation of ethnic minority members and commu-nities. Critics might ask, however, whether or not beneath the paradigm shift this would actually entail, the EMU is in fact acting as a proxy for the denominational "centre" which is subtly imposing its will upon the intransigent moral "periphery."

These are legitimate critical concerns. It does seems likely that the EMU's efforts to improve the place of ethnic groups and promote respect for ethnic diversity in the larger denominational discourse might slow the exodus of members from (and might even attract new ethnic members to) the denomination. Furthermore, the EMU might also help to advance the church's progressive moral stance vis-à-vis human sexuality in certain ethnic communities, many of whose members are for various reasons opposed to elements of this stance. However, it would be cynical and unfair to dismiss the EMU's formation in the 1990s and its current mandate as merely part of a shrewd management strategy either to improve the church's membership rates or to tame unruly moral conservatives. The situation is, as usual, more complicated than this. Personally, I take seriously the church's and the EMU's claims to be engaged in a "re-visioning" of the church that is intended to keep this venerable institution meaning-fully and dynamically engaged with the pluralistic and postcolonial environment in which they now find themselves.

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It is important to see the emergence and activities of the EMU in their broader social and religious context. The EMU is, after all, just one part of the church's efforts to become more inclusive with respect to gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, class, and other historical markers of exclusion and marginalization. Instead of resisting or lamenting the erosion of the ethos of anglo-conformity that has been such an integral part of the denomination's history, church leaders appear to be embracing these transformations.

The EMU has been in existence for nearly ten years, and to mark this milestone, the church plans to review the activities and agenda of the unit to ensure that lessons are learned from a decade of experience, and also to respond to rapid changes (mostly related to immigration) in the surrounding culture. It seems likely that such a review will not only help the denomination better understand the EMU's past and future tasks, but will also provide insights that will be of use to observers in other religious traditions, and non-religious people interested in promoting a more inclusive society. In the midst of a sometimes-paranoid public discourse about the dangers of religion to liberal democracy, we need to remember the EMU and the many other examples that demonstrate the enduring power of religion to promote values that are quite consistent with – among other policies and traditions – Canadian multiculturalism.

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Notes

[1] One need not adopt a morally unmoored relativism in order to acknowledge that so-called fundamentalists within each tradition have legitimate grievances and often operate within intellectually consistent and historically rooted worldviews. This does not mean, of course, that one has to agree with such people or groups; nor does it mean that one cannot use a variety of methods to limit their activities.

[2] All statistics in this essay are derived from the 2001 national census. See: http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census01/Products/Analytic/companion/rel/canada.cfm .

[3] For information on the EMU, see: http://www.united-church.ca/em