INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL ADAMS

Michael Adams is the co-founder and president of Environics – a group of research and communications consulting companies with offices in Canada, the United States and Europe. Since 1970, Mr. Adams' work at Environics has focused on monitoring and interpreting the impact of social trends on public policy and corporate strategy. Mr. Adams is the author of Fire and Ice: The United States, Canada and the Myth of Converging Values, which won the prestigious 2003/04 Donner Prize for the best book on Canadian public policy.

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?

It is an interesting time for religion in Canada. Although the latter half of the 20th century saw Canadians (and especially Quebecers) reject traditional religion in the form of Sunday services and automatic deference to religious authorities, religion remains an important site of discussion in this country – not least because religion is enjoying a modest resurgence in Canada as a quarter-million immigrants arrive each year from countries around the world, many of which continue to be strongly religious. Religious groups (including once dominant Christians) are now among the myriad minority groups in this country whose rights and desires serve as tests for our notions of fairness and discrimination. Moreover, religious fundamentalism appears to be reasserting itself around the world in ways that Canadians, from their relatively secular and peaceable kingdom, can only view with suspicion and alarm.

With the collapse of European communism symbolized by the collapse of the Berlin wall in 1989, global conflict seems to have moved away from the ideological – the competition between communism and capitalism/democracy – and regressed to an earlier form of itself. The main actors in the conflict of ideologies over the past couple of centuries were nation-states. Now it seems we have reverted to the kind of conflicts we had prior to the rise of the nation-state, that between cultures, differentiated primarily by religion and tribe.

Canadians are concerned by their national project of multiculturalism and deeply committed to the ideals of non-discrimination codified in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, a document which, our surveys show, is becoming increasingly important to Canadians' sense of national identity. In view of this disposition, they are wary of discrimination on religious or other grounds. Still, in a global climate whose most consuming struggle is, if not a clash of civilizations (in Samuel Huntington's controversial formulation), then at least heavily informed by religious zeal and rhetoric, Canadians find themselves torn between the ideal of equality and the fear of creeping fundamentalism in their midst.

Most Canadians have for years expressed wariness of fundamentalist Christianity as manifested in American politics. One need look no farther than the anti-same sex marriage initiatives undertaken in many states (and rejected only in Arizona) – invariably spearheaded by religious conservatives – to see that religion plays a different role in policymaking in the United States than in Canada, where even under a Conservative government parliament voted to legalize same-sex marriage.

Then after 9/11, Canadians, like many others, became concerned about violent extremism operating under the banner of Islam. Subsequent clashes and acts of terrorism in a number of European countries (the Netherlands, the U.K., Spain, France and Denmark) have caused deep and sustained concerns about the ways in which religion can become entangled with political extremism.

Canadians are wary of religiosity for two reasons: they fear religious extremists will commit acts of terrorism in Canada as in 1985 with the Air India tragedy off the coast of Ireland and as is suspected was intended in Toronto after the arrest of 18 Muslim men and youth in the spring of 2006. In addition to extremism, Canadians fear that fundamentalist religiosity will imperil core Canadian values enshrined in our now beloved *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, particularly the guarantee of gender equality. A recent Environics poll of Canadian Muslims shows a majority (of both women and men) believe Canadian courts should recognize Sharia law in the settlement of family disputes. The vast majority of the population overall, fearing Sharia Law means religious patriarchy and a barrier to the integration of Muslim newcomers, disagree. They reason that family law in Canada is secular law. In Ontario, the government has refused to recognize Sharia law and, amid the controversy over that code, rescinded the previous alternate dispute settlement compromise extended to Orthodox Jews years before. For the majority of Canadians, religion is a private matter and must take a back seat when it comes to the laws that govern a tolerant, pluralistic society. If as Pierre Trudeau famously said in 1967, the state has no place in the bedrooms of the nation, then religion has no place in the nation's legislatures and courts in 2007.

Of course religious groups can speak out on public policy issues and will be more than welcome to do so on issues of national concern such as poverty, homelessness, and foreign policy. But attempting to advance the cause of religious ideology in our public domain will be treated with great suspicion by the majority of Canadians. Even Canadian Christians, when hearing pronouncements from religious leaders, are more likely than not to ask the question, "What would Jesus say or do?" than to automatically defer to those on the top of the religious pyramid.

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

It is my view that first generation religiosity is not to be feared. What is to be feared is discrimination against the foreign-born and the mismatch between the promises of Canadian multiculturalism and actual social and economic outcomes for immigrants. Immigrants who cannot find jobs or can only find jobs paying well below what their paper qualifications would suggest will not be happy in this country. Nor will their children, who will have even higher expectations of equality than their parents – and will be more bitterly disappointed if those expectations are not met. Should the second generation not achieve the "Canadian dream" of equality, there is danger of their reverting to religious extremism, evidence of which is all too apparent in today's Europe.

Religion is not the issue. If history repeats itself, religiosity will decline or evolve over time from the fundamentalist variety to one of tolerance, inclusion and pluralism.

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

Religious diversity is a fact. It is to be celebrated just as is the diversity of our many races and ethnicities. The real issue is economic opportunity. The plethora of diversities; our system of public education; the role of the media all will inexorably lead to a type of social change that will be very much in the tradition of the non-violent accommodation of diversity.

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

Religious extremism in Canada is marginal and in decline. Polling shows a remarkable openness to others in this country. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, Canada is the most intolerant, racist country in the world, except for all the others.

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

Anti-Semitism is a prejudice whose virulence and centuries of longevity are not, I don't think, fully understood. Anti-semitism has declined dramatically in Canada over the past half-century. Anyone who cites appalling but occasional crimes such as Jewish cemetery desecrations as evidence that there has been little progress on anti-Semitism in recent decades, need only recall that during the Holocaust, Canadians permitted their politicians to turn away Jewish refugees from Europe, invoking the slogan, "None is too many." Such behaviour is unimaginable today. Canadians are not perfect – but they have come a very, very long way.

As for Islamophobia, I believe two factors are at work. The first is the association of Islam with terrorism – an association which Muslims with extremist political agendas trumpet, and to which most ordinary Muslims object strenuously. The second is the fact that Muslims have become a lightening rod for many Western countries' anxieties about the integration of newcomers. Many debates about multiculturalism have come to hinge on Muslims for a number of reasons. There was much talk about Britain's "homegrown terrorists." Many European countries' immigrant populations are overwhelmingly Muslim (because of the colonial links between Europe, Africa, and Asia). And there is the simple fact that some Muslim practices, such as the wearing of headscarves among women, are visible to a casual observer – whereas religious beliefs, political opinions, and cultural practices are not. (Recall the flare-up in Canada when a Sikh RCMP officer fought for the right to wear his turban in lieu of the traditional Stetson – sometimes the concrete matter of a garment can prompt a wide-ranging conversation about values, symbols, and identities.)

In all matters of prejudice, I believe that education and economic opportunity are crucial. Again and again in our surveys we find people with higher levels of education and higher incomes express less prejudiced attitudes than others. When people are well informed and feel secure and free in their own lives, the backgrounds, beliefs, and practices of others are matters of happy curiosity – not suspicious hostility. A second factor that diminishes prejudice is personal contact. Canadians of all faiths who have regular contact with Jews and Muslims are vastly more likely to express positive opinions of these groups. Truly diverse communities yield healthy social outcomes.

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

Religion is one of the cornerstones of our cultural heritage. The fact that Canada is now a microcosm of the world means our schools must teach children about all the world's great religions. Religious studies should be a part of the core curriculum in our public schools, as important as Canadian history and the three r's. This goes for Roman Catholic separate schools too and even the so-called independent schools, including those sponsored by religious denominations.