

## Actes /Proceedings

Colloque international | International workshop

### Dialogues culturels, religion et communication Cultural Dialogues, Religion and Communication

October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2009

University of Ottawa

Department of Communication of the University of Ottawa

in collaboration with

Consortium for International Studies in Religion, Communication and Culture of the University of Miami

Canada Research Chair in Collective Intelligence

Canada Research Chair in the Contextualization of Religion in a Diverse Canada

University Saint Paul



uOttawa

Faculté des arts  
Faculty of Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI  
SCHOOL of  
COMMUNICATION



**USP** UNIVERSITÉ SAINT-PAUL  
SAINT PAUL UNIVERSITY

## *Contents*

Introduction	4
Les fondements du dialogue interreligieux Henri Atlan	8
Interreligious dialogue: Still a controversial topic in the Catholic Church Gregory Baum	29
<i>Capillitas</i> : religion, communication and syncretism in small roadside communities in Venezuela José Enrique Finol & David Enrique Finol	45
Media narratives of the interactions between religions and cultures in Canada Richelle Wiseman	54
Community of belief vs. community in creation: A challenge for religion communicators Douglas F. Cannon	72
Public Relations and religious diversity: Toward the common good Donn James Tilson	88
Grassroots community inter-faith responses to domestic and international conflicts: Case studies from Wales & England Shereen Williams	100
Cultural and religious dialogue: A legacy of religious art Judith E. Dietz	118
Media and religion in Quebec's recent debates Solange Lefebvre & Jennifer Guyver	127
Religions et entertainment médiatique : sont-ils compatibles? Guy Marchessault	146

Race, gender, religion: Constructions of the Other in mainstream Canadian news media Yasmin Jiwani	168
Recovering the past in Jodhaa Akbar: Masculinities, femininities and cultural politics in Bombay cinema Shahnaz Khan	187
Cooked, uncooked or just half-baked: Secular versus religious arguments in the public domain Ian Linden	204
Media policy, co-existence and freedom of speech: Notes for an address Ronald Cohen	220

## Introduction

In his 1990 book *Project for a global ethics (Projekt Weltethos)*, the theologian Hans Küng stated that “world peace will not be possible without peace between religions, without a dialogue between religions.” Today, the significance of this assertion is more evident than ever, underscoring an urgent appeal for a practice of recognition and respect, and understanding in the context of growing conflicts and expansion of economic and cultural globalization.

Communication, in its various forms from media to institutional can, and often does play a decisive role in shaping public perceptions of religions and cultural diversity. In some instances, this role is one of reinforcing prejudices and stereotypes; in others, it can foster a better understanding and an inter-religious dialogue. Recent public debates in Canada, the US, Europe, and the Middle East illustrate the extent to which media can be a disruptive force when they focus only on the most negative aspects of a certain faith, particularly those related to fundamentalist views. And yet other examples in Western and non-Western societies demonstrate the power of communication to bring people of different faiths and cultures together.

Against such a backdrop, questions arise: what is the role of communication and of communicators in particular, in the dialogue between religions and cultures? To what extent can communication contribute to overcome prejudices and help find common grounds among religions for development, progress, prosperity, and peace?

In order to reflect on these questions and other important issues, the Department of Communication of the University of Ottawa in partnership with the Canada Research Chair in Collective Intelligence, the Canada Research Chair in the Contextualization of Religion in a Diverse Canada, the Consortium for International Studies in Religion, Communication and Culture of the University of Miami, and the Saint Paul University, hosted an international workshop on “Cultural Dialogues, Religion and Communication” on October 22, 2009.

This international and bilingual workshop provided a unique opportunity to gather leading scholars who represent different disciplinary backgrounds, including social sciences and the humanities, and communication professionals with concrete experiences in the area of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue. Theologians, philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, legal, and communication scholars came together with journalists, public relations practitioners, broadcasting executives, and art experts, to discuss and exchange ideas on how to address the urgent need to promote a practice of recognizing and respecting the diversity of cultures and religions. The main objective of the workshop was to contribute to a better understanding of the role of communication, including mediated, institutional, and face-to-face communication processes, in the promotion of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogues.

The first session of the workshop was consecrated to “Inter-religious encounters through communication: Philosophical, ethical and theological foundations”<sup>1</sup>. Professor Henri Atlan, (Université Paris VI and Hebrew University, Jerusalem) opened the workshop with a paper entitled “Les fondements du dialogue interreligieux,” that was also the subject of his inaugural public lecture at the University of Ottawa on October 21, 2009. Professor Gregory Baum (McGill University) followed with a reflection on “Interreligious dialogue: Still a controversial topic in the Catholic Church.”

The second session dealt with “The encounter between religions and cultures in the media and the cultural industries.” Professor José Enrique Finol (Universidad del Zulia) shared the results of a research that he did in collaboration with David Enrique Finol about a practice of popular religion entitled “*Capillitas*: Religion, communication and syncretism in small roadside communities in Venezuela.” Ms. Richelle Wiseman (Centre for Faith and Media) presented a critical view on “Media narratives of the interactions between religions and cultures in Canada”.

---

<sup>1</sup> These proceedings reflect only part of the presentations made during the workshop. The videos of all the presentations are available in <http://artsites.uottawa.ca/culturaldialogues/>

The third session explored some initiatives in the area of “Inter-religious/inter-cultural dialogues, cooperation and conflict resolution.” Dr. Doug Cannon (Religion Communicators Council) set-up the tone of the panel with his presentation about “Community of belief vs. community in creation: A challenge for religion communicators.” Professor Donn Tilson (University of Miami) followed with a paper on “Public relations and religious diversity: Toward the common good.” Ms. Shereen Williams (Council of Ethnic Minority Voluntary Sector Organizations and Radio Salaam-Shalom) offered a first-hand account of her experience in “Grassroots community inter-faith responses to domestic and international conflicts: Case studies from Wales & England.” Ms. Judith Dietz (Art Gallery of Nova Scotia) closed with a presentation about “Cultural and religious dialogue: A legacy of religious art.”

The fourth session reflected on “The representations of the ‘other’.” Professor Solange Lefebvre (Université de Montréal) and Mrs. Jennifer Guyver (Doctoral student, McGill University) opened the discussion with a detailed analysis about “Media and religion in Quebec’s recent debates.” Professor Guy Marchessault (Université Saint Paul) explored the answers to the question: “Religions et *entertainment* médiatique : Sont-ils compatibles?” Professor Yasmin Jiwani (Concordia University) followed with her study on “Race, gender religion: Constructions of the other in mainstream Canadian news media.” Professor Shahnaz Khan (Wilfrid Laurier University) closed the session with her paper about “Recovering the past in Jodhaa Akbar: Masculinities, femininities and cultural politics in Bombay cinema.”

The fifth and final session of the workshop discussed “Dialogues between religions and cultures in the global public spheres.” Professor Ian Linden (Tony Blair Faith Foundation) reflected on the interaction between secularity and religious discourses in a paper entitled “Cooked, uncooked or just half-baked: Secular versus religious arguments in the public domain.” Mr. Ronald Cohen (Canadian Broadcast Standards Council) closed the workshop with his notes on “Media policy, co-existence and freedom of speech.”

This workshop, as reflected in these proceedings, provided a unique opportunity to identify multidisciplinary research perspectives on the role that communication and communicators play in such interreligious and cultural dialogues. It also was a first step towards the development of further collaborative opportunities between researchers and communication professionals in order to positively affect the dialogue between religions and cultures.

*Isaac Nahon-Serfaty & Rukhsana Ahmed (University of Ottawa)*

## Les fondements du dialogue interreligieux

Henri Atlan

Université de Paris VI et Université Hébraïque de Jérusalem

**Résumé :** Plutôt que de fondements il s'agit de différentes sortes de dialogues engagés à différents niveaux, de religions entre elles et avec la science et la philosophie. Au niveau des croyances et des dogmes, ces dialogues sont souvent des occasions de pièges et de malentendus. La « spiritualité » qui leur est supposée commune en opposition avec le matérialisme de la science est une notion trompeuse. Des religions qui semblent proches superficiellement, comme les monothéismes, sont en fait très différentes quand on questionne les sens et les conséquences de ces croyances. Mais des traditions éloignées dans l'espace et le temps peuvent faire apparaître des convergences intéressantes au niveau de leurs enseignements philosophiques. Enfin, le socle primitif infralinguistique des expériences du sacré aux origines de l'humanité a traversé les millénaires en étant décliné de différentes façons, suivant l'histoire des différentes cultures.

Une occasion privilégiée de dialogue s'est imposée avec les questions éthiques et juridiques que posent actuellement les sciences et les techniques. Les religions et les philosophies confrontées à ces questions nouvelles se rencontrent nécessairement à propos des réponses qu'elles tentent d'élaborer. De ce fait, leur rôle traditionnel dans la généalogie de l'éthique se trouve renouvelé par les tentatives de construction empirique d'une éthique universelle concrète non limitée à l'universel théorique mais singulier proclamé par telle ou telle religion ou doctrine philosophique. Cette construction sans garantie de réussite est pourtant favorisée par la sous détermination des décisions par leurs motivations, propriété de l'argumentation dérivée de la sous détermination des théories par les faits.

**Mots clés :** *bien et mal, biotechnologies, éthique, plaisir et douleur, universalité, sacré, science, spiritualités.*

**Abstract:** Instead of foundations, it is more about different kinds of dialogues undertaken at dissimilar levels of religions among themselves, and with sciences and philosophy. Through beliefs and dogmas, these dialogues are often "opportunities for traps" and misunderstandings. "Spirituality" which is supposed in opposition with scientific materialism, is a misleading concept. Religions that seem close, apparently, like the monotheisms, are actually very different when we inquired the meaning and outcome of these beliefs. But traditions distant in space and time can reveal interesting convergence throughout their philosophical teachings. The primitive infra-language position on the sacred and the origins of humanity traversed millenniums and have being declined in different ways, depending on the history of dissimilar cultures. A privileged opportunity for dialog got imposed with the ethical and legal issues currently highlighted by sciences and techniques. Religions and philosophies confronted with these new issues necessarily meet on the answers they attempt to develop. As a result, their traditional role in the genealogy of ethics is renewed by empirical ethics structure, not limited by the theoretical and universal but declared as singular by this or that religion or philosophical doctrine. This construction without guarantee of success is however mediated by the sub-determination decisions and by their motivations (argument derived from the sub determination property of theories related to facts).

**Key words:** *good and evil, biotechnologies, ethics, pleasure and pain, universality, sacred, science, spirituality.*



Je dois dire pour commencer que je ne crois pas qu'il existe véritablement des fondements au dialogue interreligieux en dehors de la bonne volonté et du rejet de la violence. A partir de là on peut essayer de réfléchir aux occasions d'entreprendre de tels dialogues et aux moyens d'éviter autant que possible les pièges et les malentendus.

Comme c'est indiqué dans la présentation des objectifs de ce colloque le dialogue interreligieux et interculturel en général implique certaines formes de communication dont il faut se demander lesquelles sont les plus appropriées à ce que le dialogue soit positif c'est-à-dire qu'il aboutisse à une meilleure compréhension de l'autre interlocuteur.

En effet, le dialogue peut être établi à plusieurs niveaux suivant ce que l'on cherche à communiquer. Il peut s'agir du niveau des croyances et des représentations du monde. Mais il peut s'agir aussi des comportements et même des rituels que différentes religions apportent à des questions éthiques, sociales et même politiques.

Au niveau des croyances il peut s'agir des articles de foi ou des dogmes ou de certaines visions du monde comme par exemple la création *ex nihilo* par un Créateur omnipotent et omniscient ou la transmigration des âmes et leurs réincarnations sous des formes et des conditions différentes, etc. Ces croyances sont censées parfois justifier des comportements qui peuvent sembler étranges. A ce niveau je ne crois pas que le dialogue puisse être très fécond, sinon pour satisfaire une curiosité d'anthropologue ou d'historien des religions. Et le minimum requis pour satisfaire cette curiosité c'est, en dehors de la bonne volonté, l'ouverture d'esprit nécessaire pour tenter d'entrer dans une culture étrangère, à la façon des ethnologues. Ceci n'est d'ailleurs pas à négliger car cette curiosité peut être parfois l'occasion de véritables échanges.

Mais en général, quand on reste à ce niveau des croyances et des principes généraux, les dialogues véritables entre religions différentes sont souvent des dialogues de sourds. On cherche à s'unir autour de croyances communes mais il s'agit le plus souvent de malentendus.

On croit par exemple que les religions monothéistes peuvent s'entendre plus facilement parce qu'elles auraient le même Dieu. Or c'est inexact. Outre le fait que cela commence par exclure

toutes les parties de l'humanité qui ne sont ni chrétiennes, ni musulmanes ni juives, il ne s'agit pas vraiment du même Dieu. Tout d'abord il est proclamé unique mais de plusieurs façons différentes, ce qui fut à l'origine de guerres de religions avec lesquelles nous n'en avons pas encore fini. En plus c'est un Dieu concrètement différent suivant le statut de ce que l'on appelle la Parole de Dieu. En particulier, les conséquences sont très différentes si l'on croit que la Parole de Dieu doit être lue et entendue littéralement telle qu'elle est écrite dans la Bible ou le Coran, ou bien au contraire que ces textes sont ouverts aux interprétations comme tous les grands textes sacrés tels que les Vedas et Upanishads et aussi les mythes d'origines des différentes cultures.

Ce n'est pas le même Dieu non plus suivant qu'on le considère comme transcendant ou immanent ou les deux, ou suivant qu'on s'y réfère comme à une Personne, soit une seule ou une en trois, ou bien comme à un Dieu impersonnel identifié à la Nature comme le Dieu de Spinoza.

Et c'est encore un Dieu différent suivant qu'il est véhiculé par des religions prosélytes qui se proclament universelles et sont décidées à convertir dans la mesure du possible toute l'humanité, ou de religions « tribales » acceptant d'être limitées à des aires géographiques, culturelles et linguistiques particulières, pour lesquelles l'universalité passe éventuellement par la rencontre et les échanges avec les autres différents.

Mais à un autre niveau des échanges intéressants peuvent se produire, celui des philosophies et des doctrines enseignées qui ne se bornent pas aux catéchismes et aux articles de foi. Lorsque les rencontres se produisent entre personnes érudites qui connaissent les divers aspects doctrinaux de leur propre tradition, il peut arriver que sans tomber dans le syncrétisme des expériences de l'autre nous permettent de mieux comprendre certaines de nos propres expériences. C'est ce qui s'est passé par exemple lors d'une rencontre assez extraordinaire à Dharamsala entre une délégation de philosophes juifs et de rabbins de différentes écoles et le Dalaï Lama entouré de maîtres du bouddhisme tibétain<sup>1</sup>.

Ce genre de rencontres peut faire apparaître des expériences communes malgré des environnements culturels et sociaux très différents, tout en évitant le syncrétisme et le post-modernisme où tout serait pareil et tout se vaudrait. Ainsi, malgré les distances apparemment

infranchissables entre le monothéisme juif et le polythéisme hindou même revu à travers le bouddhisme, les aspects les plus profonds des doctrines éventuellement véhiculés par leurs enseignements ésotériques ont pu se rencontrer et permettre de mieux situer les différences réelles et les enjeux éventuellement sociaux et même politiques de ces différences.

Car les religions ne sont pas désincarnées. Elles sont portées par des sociétés, des cultures, des peuples engagés parfois dans des conflits économiques et politiques. Je pense au dialogue judéo musulman rendu difficile sinon empoisonné par le conflit israélo arabe. Je pense aussi aux dialogues islamo chrétien et judéo-chrétien qui traînent encore les contentieux respectivement de la colonisation par l'Occident et des siècles de persécutions par l'Occident chrétien. Est-ce que la religion est piégée et instrumentalisée, au service d'un conflit politique ou bien peut-elle avoir assez de force et prendre le recul suffisant pour contribuer au contraire à la solution du conflit ? Nous sommes sans cesse confrontés à cette alternative.

Les rencontres au sommet permettent parfois des enrichissements inattendus. Les théologies musulmane, juive et chrétienne depuis le Moyen Age déjà se sont enrichies d'enseignements de philosophes grecs païens comme Aristote, Platon et d'autres Stoïciens et Néo-platoniciens qui sacrifiaient consciencieusement aux dieux grecs.

Plus près de nous, j'ai connu à Jérusalem un Juif ultra orthodoxe et anti-nationaliste qui avait trouvé chez Nietzsche avec son Eternel Retour et sa philosophie de la vie la meilleure source d'inspiration pour comprendre la Tora en profondeur.

Un autre exemple est celui du socle primitif des expériences du *sacré* qui plongent dans les origines même de l'humanité, alors que les religions n'étaient pas encore instituées. L'expérience du sacré a été ensuite déclinée de différentes façons par les religions, parfois de façon contradictoire où le sacré peut devenir comme le tabou objet de vénération ou de rejet. Je pense à ces expériences que rencontraient les premiers hommes en même temps qu'ils prenaient conscience de la mort et la ritualisaient. C'est là l'origine du monde des transes chamaniques, amis aussi des prophètes et des oracles dans l'Antiquité et de ce que l'on appelle aujourd'hui les états modifiés de conscience, éventuellement induits rituellement par des plantes hallucinogènes,

mais aussi du monde des rêves, des expériences limites et surtout d'Eros, tous ces mondes plus ou moins refoulés et en tous cas strictement encadrés par les grandes religions de l'Ecrit mais qui ont traversé les millénaires de civilisations. On est frappé par exemple à la vue des rituels phalliques du culte de Shiva en Inde qui évoquent forcément, malgré les différences, les rituels phalliques de la Grèce antique autour de Dionysos notamment. Alors que les cultures et les religions ont du mal à communiquer en profondeur à cause des barrières de langages, ces expériences sont fondamentales comme socle commun en ce qu'elles sont infra linguistiques.

Ces rencontres sont passionnantes à plus d'un titre non pas pour déboucher sur un syncrétisme et un relativisme superficiel où tout se vaut et tout se confond avec tout. Au contraire, c'est par l'approfondissement de la compréhension des différences que ces rencontres au sommet sont enrichissantes et permettent de dépasser la simple confrontation de croyances incommensurables.

\*

Mais il existe un domaine relativement nouveau où le dialogue interreligieux est devenu nécessaire et même indispensable au niveau cette fois non des croyances ni des doctrines mais à celui des comportements et c'est de cela que je voudrais surtout parler maintenant. Ce dialogue est imposé actuellement par les défis de la modernité que lancent les développements extraordinaires des sciences et des techniques depuis un peu plus d'un siècle. Autrement dit les religions sont ensemble confrontées à ces défis et leurs rencontres portent sur les différentes façons qu'elles ont de tenter de répondre à ces défis. Elles trouvent là des occasions de se rencontrer sur des questions concrètes assez précises.

C'est une rencontre asymétrique : d'un côté la science associée à la technique a réussi à établir une sorte d'universalité de fait qui traverse toutes les cultures et s'impose à elles, de l'autre les cultures religieuses particulières, différentes les unes des autres. Cette asymétrie a déjà un aspect positif en ce que toutes les cultures religieuses sont obligées de se confronter d'une façon ou d'une autre à la même culture scientifique qui les traverse. De ce point de vue, elles trouvent parfois une espèce de dénominateur commun dans ce front commun qu'elles établissent sinon contre la science au moins devant elle. Ce dénominateur commun est ce que l'on entend invoquer

de plus en plus dans ces confrontations, à savoir la spiritualité ou les spiritualités : les religions s'occuperaient de spiritualité dont le besoin serait d'autant plus pressant que la science et la technique s'imposent dans la vie de tous les jours.

Mais il y a là un premier malentendu que je voudrais d'abord lever. Je commencerai donc par analyser les conditions de rencontres entre le savoir scientifique et les savoirs traditionnels sous jacents aux religions. Dans un deuxième temps j'essaierai d'analyser les conditions dans lesquelles les différentes traditions se rencontrent pour tenter d'élaborer des réponses aussi universelles que possibles aux questions d'éthique posées par les sciences et les techniques.

Science et spiritualité évoquent tout de suite une opposition classique entre le corps et l'esprit, la matière et la pensée ; la science étant supposée être, par définition, matérialiste ; la spiritualité, elle, spirituelle. Ce sont ces ensembles d'oppositions dans lesquels se sont fourvoyés nombre de théologiens, de philosophes matérialistes ou de philosophes spiritualistes.

En fait la science actuelle se situe plutôt dans une perspective résolument moniste, c'est-à-dire ni matérialiste ni spiritualiste, dont l'une des expressions les plus élaborées est probablement celle de Spinoza : « Le corps et l'esprit sont une seule et même chose que nous percevons sous des aspects différents ». Cela montre qu'en droit, on pourrait, en principe, tout décrire en termes de corps en mouvement donc de matière, mais on pourrait aussi tout décrire en termes d'idées ou d'esprit. C'est seulement une question de langage, plus ou moins commode et adapté à certains sujets. Certaines traditions qui ont développé des techniques de méditation parlent à ce propos d'entraînement de l'esprit. Il s'agit au moins autant d'entraînement du corps que de l'esprit et c'est probablement parce qu'il s'agit d'entraînement du corps que cet entraînement de l'esprit semble non seulement réel mais apparemment efficace.

Plutôt que de débattre de science et de spiritualité, il est plus intéressant d'opposer, d'une certaine façon, les sciences (les méthodes scientifiques), à des traditions de connaissances non scientifiques, généralement préscientifiques, ayant des objets, des domaines de légitimités et des techniques différents. C'est ce que j'avais autrefois tenté dans un livre intitulé *A tort et à raison*,

*Intercritique de la science et du mythe*, où il s'agissait de faire apparaître non pas des similitudes mais au contraire des différences entre différentes sortes de rationalités.

La science a créé un langage universel et ce n'est pas le moindre de ses mérites. Il est relativement banal, à l'heure actuelle, de pouvoir communiquer sans trop de malentendus sur des questions scientifiques et d'échanger sur les difficultés que posent ces questions, entre des personnes qui viennent de tous les coins du monde. Personnes qui parlent des langues différentes, mais arrivent à se mettre d'accord sur ce dont elles parlent, ceci grâce à un langage unique, universel. Là où l'espéranto et toute une multitude d'autres tentatives ont échoué, le *Basic English* a réussi. Ce langage universel est vraiment un grand accomplissement, mais au prix d'un grand appauvrissement. Shakespeare aurait du mal à se retrouver dans ce *Basic English*. Cependant, tous les autres s'y retrouvent. Il permet donc ce type d'échanges.

Le champ d'applications de ce langage, de ces méthodes est le champ d'application de ce qu'on appelle, la méthode « empirico logique ». Elle combine des observations objectives et reproductibles avec les notions communes de la raison qui sont constitutives de la logique.

En face de cela, les savoirs traditionnels ont été véhiculés par des langues différentes, elles-mêmes associées à des expériences historiques, géographiques, sociales, culturelles très différentes. Ces savoirs reposent sur des récits extraordinaires, en partie historiques, en partie mythologiques (notamment dans les mythes d'origines), qui inspirent non seulement des représentations et des croyances, mais aussi des règles de comportement, des habitudes, donc des mœurs pour les individus et pour les rapports sociaux à l'intérieur de ces cultures et de ces sociétés.

Résultat, au départ, on est ici loin de l'universel. En revanche, tout un champ de la réalité, mis entre parenthèses par la méthode scientifique, reprend ici un droit d'existence ; je veux parler de la subjectivité et de la diversité, et en particulier la non reproductibilité. La plupart des expériences dans notre vie de tous les jours sont non reproductibles et c'est en cela qu'elles peuvent difficilement être objet des méthodes scientifiques. En revanche, ces traditions se nourrissent, en réalité, de ces expériences suggestives, plus difficilement transmissibles et partageables (surtout quand on a affaire à des langues différentes) et de la diversité mise entre parenthèses par la recherche scientifique. La subjectivité et la diversité qui débordent le champ

des méthodes scientifiques sont au contraire ici au centre de ces expériences significatives. Le rapport à la raison de ces savoirs traditionnels n'est pas, contrairement à ce que l'on pense souvent, simple, en ce sens qu'il serait purement et simplement irrationnel.

Ces savoirs sont véhiculés dans des discours qui sont parfois en apparence irrationnels quand ils sont présentés d'une façon volontairement irrationnelle. Je pense aux *koans* bouddhistes qui manipulent les paradoxes. Ces paradoxes, parfois humoristiques, n'impliquent pas du tout une irrationalité. Ils impliquent, au contraire, une prise de conscience de ce qu'est le rationnel et une décision délibérée de casser ce cadre dans certaines situations.

Ces savoirs traditionnels se présentent alors sous une forme que l'on pourrait appeler « a-rationnelle » ni rationnelle ni irrationnelle. De ce point de vue, ils ressemblent beaucoup aux expériences artistiques. Ainsi, on ne peut pas dire que les expériences esthétiques sont rationnelles ou irrationnelles. Comme le disait Vladimir Jankélévitch : « *La musique ne connaît pas le principe de non contradiction* ». Cela ne veut pas dire qu'elle est irrationnelle.

Mais ces savoirs utilisent aussi souvent la raison et se présentent alors comme des discours rationnels, dans certains cas avec une utilisation différente de la raison de celle qui est faite dans les discours scientifiques. Différente en quoi ? Le plus souvent nous avons affaire à ce que nous pourrions appeler une herméneutique : une utilisation de la raison dans une activité d'interprétation. Cette interprétation fait apparaître une assez grande polysémie, en particulier des discours mythiques. Ainsi, le même discours peut signifier beaucoup de choses, très différentes et contradictoires, comme dans les interprétations des grands mythes grecs, hébreux, indiens et autres ; mais c'est justement en cela que ce discours peut apporter quelque chose, y compris à un esprit rationnel.

En cela, l'idéal est très différent de l'idéal du discours scientifique où, au contraire, ce qui est recherché est une signification univoque : il faut absolument éliminer dans le discours scientifique tout malentendu, tout chevauchement de significations autres, en visant comme une sorte d'idéal les relations mathématiques, où il n'y a plus aucune équivoque. Comme vous le savez, il s'agit d'un passage à la limite où la signification d'une formule mathématique est purement formelle. Elle n'a pas en elle-même de contenu et c'est son application éventuelle à d'autres sciences empiriques qui lui donnent un contenu.

Ces différences sont très importantes à souligner ; au lieu d'essayer, comme le font certains, d'imaginer de construire une sorte de grande synthèse scientifico mystique dans laquelle des notions scientifiques sont utilisées pour être projetées ou plaquées sur des notions traditionnelles et réciproquement.

Ainsi, ce qu'on appelle la réalité ultime de la matière serait décrite dans cette perspective unificatrice, que je pense mystificatrice, de la même manière par la mécanique quantique et par des traditions extrêmes orientales. Je fais allusion à cette œuvre, qui a bénéficié d'un moment de célébrité, *le Tao de la physique*, (*The Tao of Physic*) de Fritjof Capra. Au *colloque de Cordoue*, qui a aussi eu son heure de gloire, il s'agissait de montrer que la science moderne avait redécouvert, suivant les uns, l'irrationnel des traditions ; suivant les autres, la rationalité des traditions. De même, la non localité des particules quantiques est également chargée d'une multitude de significations traditionnelles et cela n'a pourtant rien à voir.

Je ne parle même pas du *Big Bang* censé nous renvoyer à la création de l'Univers par le Créateur, alors qu'encore une fois, cela n'a rien à voir. Au contraire, ces expressions doivent être remises dans leurs contextes différents et ne pas être confondues les unes avec les autres car cette confusion s'avère préjudiciable aux uns et aux autres.

Une autre source de malentendus quand on parle de spiritualité concerne les expériences différentes que nous pouvons faire de ce que nous appelons en français, « conscience » et en anglais, « *consciousness* » ou « *awareness* » qui n'est déjà plus tout à fait la même chose, et par d'autres termes qui désignent d'autres expériences dans d'autres langues et d'autres traditions.

Il se trouve que la conscience est aussi un objet de recherches scientifiques et en tant que tel on peut en parler en *Basic English* de façon à peu près compréhensible pour tout le monde. C'est un objet très particulier car il est difficile de faire une expérimentation reproductible sur des phénomènes de conscience dans la mesure où on ne peut avoir accès à une grosse partie de ces phénomènes de conscience que par l'introspection ou par la description, qui repose elle-même sur des introspections. Cela dit, des techniques ont été développées et apportent des renseignements intéressants.



Entre autres choses intéressantes que nous avons apprises par ces méthodes, disons d'abord qu'il est illusoire de vouloir considérer la conscience comme une barrière absolue qui séparerait certains êtres d'autres êtres : des êtres conscients, des êtres non conscients. À l'intérieur même des êtres conscients, ce développement de la conscience n'est pas un phénomène abrupt, de telle sorte que la conscience peut difficilement être considérée comme une réalité qui existerait en tout ou rien telle que soit elle est là, soit elle n'est pas là.

Ce n'est pas, y compris la conscience humaine, une propriété en tout ou rien, donc indivisible c'est-à-dire une propriété qui ne pourrait pas être décomposée en propriétés différentes les unes des autres. Nous pouvons observer ailleurs que dans l'espèce humaine certaines de ces propriétés qui sont attachées à l'existence d'une conscience : par exemple dans certaines espèces animales, notamment des primates, mais aussi dans des machines dites « intelligentes ». La conscience humaine, telle que nous en faisons l'expérience par introspection et par le biais de nos relations interhumaines, à la fois verbales et non verbales, est plus un ensemble de propriétés qu'une propriété qui serait indivisible ; un ensemble de capacités différentes qui ne peuvent pas être réduites les unes aux autres et qui ne peuvent pas, non plus, être réduites à leur simple addition. On peut citer parmi ces propriétés : la capacité de concevoir des projets et d'agir pour les réaliser, l'intentionnalité au sens technique psycholinguistique (la capacité de créer des significations, de produire et de traiter des représentations symboliques), la réflexivité comme conscience de soi en train de percevoir et d'agir, la réflexivité du langage capable de parler de lui-même.

Toutes ces propriétés impliquent le pouvoir de stocker de l'information en mémoire, de rappeler cette information, de la traiter de façon « auto-organisatrice », en créant de nouvelles informations et de nouvelles significations. La mémoire, l'auto-organisation et même la conscience de soi peuvent être, dans une large mesure, produites et simulées par des mécanismes inconscients. Or la conscience ne se réduit pas à ces mécanismes bien qu'elle les présuppose. Ce que nous appelons donc « conscience humaine » apparaît comme le résultat d'une association de toutes ces capacités dans un ensemble où elles modifient leurs performances les unes les autres, de telle sorte qu'on ne peut pas simplement les additionner. Tout ceci est apparemment le résultat d'une complexification progressive des corps vivants au cours de l'évolution et, notamment, de l'organisation de leur cerveau.

Des résultats fort intéressants ont été obtenus ces trente dernières années grâce au développement des sciences cognitives, bien que ces résultats soient encore l'objet de controverses au sujet de leurs interprétations philosophiques.

Mais dans d'autres cultures, d'autres traditions, il existe des mots différents. Il faut essayer de les comprendre en les replaçant dans leurs traditions.

Il y en a un que j'ai découvert à l'occasion d'un colloque d'une dizaine de jours au Japon qui s'est révélé tourner pratiquement entièrement autour d'un seul mot : le mot « *ki* ». Qu'est-ce que le *ki* ? Les Japonais présents essayaient d'expliquer. Quelques européens semblaient avoir des idées assez précises. En fait on invoquait de façon confuse les idées d'énergie ou de force vitale dans un contexte de science occidentale totalement inadéquat.

Un autre exemple est celui de l'âme dans les traditions gréco-romaines. Vous savez que l'âme a disparu du discours scientifique. Elle a été remplacée par l'esprit ou *mind* en anglais. Il se trouve que dans ces traditions gréco-romaines, en particulier chez les Grecs, différents mots désignaient les différentes parties de l'âme : le *noos*, que l'on peut traduire par esprit et chaque fois cela pose des problèmes de traduction difficiles; la *psyché*, probablement le mental ; le *thumos*, le lieu des passions. Dans la philosophie hébraïque du Moyen Age et dans la Kabbale l'âme a aussi différentes parties qui correspondent approximativement à l'âme végétative, animale et intellectuelle qu'on trouve aussi chez Aristote. Chez les Stoïciens, ces trois parties de l'âme étaient des corps matériels : l'âme était matérielle, d'une matière plus subtile que la matière du corps, mais un peu de la même façon que la matière d'un gaz était considérée comme plus subtile que la matière d'un liquide et la matière d'un liquide plus subtile que la matière d'un solide. Jusqu'à aujourd'hui, on appelle encore « esprit de sel » le gaz chlorhydrique en gardant l'ancien sens d'esprit pour désigner un gaz : une matière considérée plus subtile qu'une matière solide.

Si l'on ne veut pas tout confondre, il vaut donc mieux savoir dans quel contexte on parle sans éliminer un contexte culturel au profit d'un autre, et certainement pas non plus les unifier. En fait ces rencontres posent essentiellement des problèmes difficiles de traduction. Pensons par exemple à la notion de personne (héritée du latin *persona* « masque ») qui a hérité du droit romain une place centrale dans la morale et le droit en Occident. Il est très difficile de trouver par

exemple en Japonais un mot qui rend compte de ses nuances à la fois anthropologiques, morales et juridiques.

Mais cette recherche de rencontres comparatives et critiques n'est pas seulement le fait d'une curiosité intellectuelle, humaine, affective, tout à fait légitime par ailleurs. Car depuis une vingtaine d'années, les rencontres entre les discours scientifiques et des discours qui proviennent de savoirs traditionnels, sont devenues, d'une certaine façon, nécessaires à cause des problèmes éthiques posés par les sciences et les techniques. J'en arrive à la dernière partie de cet exposé. Les questions d'éthique des sciences et des techniques qui se posent à tous sur la planète sont l'occasion de confrontations entre les religions non pas à propos de croyances ou de doctrines mais de comportements : quelles techniques et applications nouvelles sont-elles acceptables ou non, légitimes ou illégitimes, permises ou interdites ?

Cela a explosé littéralement dans les années 1980 avec le développement de ce qu'on appelle la bioéthique.

\*

On peut résumer schématiquement cette problématique de la façon suivante : les sciences et les techniques créent des problèmes d'éthique nouveaux sans donner en même temps les moyens de les résoudre. Par exemple, la science et la technique ont permis de séparer deux fonctions maternelles, utérine et ovarienne. Par là, elles ont créé de toutes pièces un problème qui ne s'était jamais posé : quelle est la vraie mère, la mère génétique ou celle qui porte le bébé et qui lui donne naissance ? Ni la biologie ni la médecine ne donnent de réponse à cette question, qui ne se pose pourtant qu'à cause des développements de la biologie et de la médecine. On pourrait citer beaucoup d'autres exemples, tels que les problèmes posés par le diagnostic génétique, les transplantations d'organes et autres.

Puisque les sciences et les techniques ne donnent pas toutes seules de solutions à ces problèmes qu'elles créent, d'où viennent les solutions possibles ? En paraphrasant Bergson, deux sources semblent être évidentes de la morale et de la religion, à savoir la philosophie morale et la

religion. Mais se pose alors la question de l'universalité des réponses apportées à ces problèmes qui eux sont posés à tous du fait de l'universalité de la science et de la technique.

Car on peut voir facilement que ni la philosophie ni la religion ne réussissent à donner des réponses pratiquement universelles, à suggérer des solutions qui soient acceptées par tous, spontanément, ou même après réflexion.

La religion est parfois considérée, même par des non-croyants, comme source de barrières, de garde-fous devant les excès possibles d'une techno-science, où il suffirait que quelque chose soit faisable techniquement pour que cela doive être fait. Mais par nature, chaque religion tient un discours qui n'est réellement accessible qu'au cercle plus ou moins étroit de ses fidèles. Et de plus, le même dogme, le même article de foi à un niveau général peut conduire à des attitudes opposées sur ce qui est admissible ou pas dans tel ou tel cas particulier. La croyance en Dieu peut conduire à une morale naturaliste, de « ne pas contrarier la Nature », comme on le voit souvent à propos des biotechnologies où des chefs d'Etat en sont arrivés à mettre en garde contre la tentation de « jouer à être Dieu ». Mais pour d'autres au contraire le rapport à Dieu est tel que l'homme est associé à Dieu par sa vocation à cultiver et améliorer la Création qui n'est pas parfaite, l'usage de la raison dans la science étant l'un des moyens à sa disposition pour accomplir cette vocation.

Il en est de même de principes très généraux comme « aimer son prochain comme soi-même » ou encore le « caractère sacré de la Vie », dont les applications à des situations concrètes peuvent être très différentes et même contradictoires.

Quant à la philosophie, on sait qu'elle a traditionnellement vocation à l'universalité que l'usage de la raison est censé lui faire atteindre. Mais là aussi, on peut voir que la philosophie morale n'établit des valeurs objectives, valables pour tous, qu'à l'intérieur de telle ou telle vision du monde, ontologie plus ou moins explicite qui est loin d'être partagée par tous. De plus, les principes généraux, les impératifs qu'elle propose sont rarement suffisants. Car les situations particulières sont le plus souvent trop compliquées pour être traitées simplement à partir de principes généraux d'où la solution appropriée serait déduite.

Mais l'universalité que la philosophie peut atteindre n'est dans le meilleur des cas qu'une universalité singulière, tout entière contenue dans la vie intellectuelle et pratique de rares individus. On peut certainement le regretter, mais très peu de personnes, en dehors de quelques philosophes et de leurs disciples, se conduisent dans leur existence en suivant la voie d'une philosophie morale. Cet universel singulier reste une source irremplaçable pour toute réflexion éthique, mais il reste limité justement à ces réflexions et pratiques singulières.

Quoi qu'il en soit, on en est réduit à rechercher des solutions au cas par cas en entrant dans les détails des techniques et de leurs applications, en confrontant à leur propos telles ou telles attitudes qui seraient inspirées de près ou de loin par différentes traditions. La démarche est d'autant plus difficile que les problèmes sont radicalement nouveaux par rapport aux situations connues dans le passé, au point que des écoles différentes dans une même tradition peuvent arriver parfois à des conclusions opposées sur le permis et l'interdit.

Dans cette recherche d'une universalité de fait et pas seulement théorique, autour de situations particulières et de cas concrets, on doit prendre en compte la réalité des systèmes de valeurs et de normes que les sociétés ont héritées de leur histoire et de leurs traditions.

Car dans la pratique c'est suivant ces valeurs et ces normes héritées que la plupart des individus déterminent, consciemment ou non, leurs comportements. Nous devons donc prendre en compte entre l'individu et l'espèce humaine une réalité intermédiaire, celle du groupe ou de la société. Cette réalité intermédiaire, du groupe social ou de la tribu, est bien connue des anthropologues mais souvent oubliée des philosophes et des théologiens; précisément parce que la prendre en considération semble nier dès l'origine la possibilité d'une éthique universelle. Mais ceci est une vue en tout ou rien, où soit l'éthique serait fondée sur des valeurs universelles d'où chacun pourrait déduire le même bien et le même mal, soit tout serait permis et équivalent puisque ce qui est bien pour l'un peut être mal pour l'autre. Or, ce tout ou rien ignore la réalité de notre situation intermédiaire où des jugements normatifs, explicites ou implicites sur ce qui est bien et ce qui est mal, sont hérités socialement et culturellement. Et cette situation, elle, est universelle, même si les contenus des systèmes de valeurs et de normes ne le sont pas. En fait, tout individu humain ne

devient humain, n'acquiert son humanité, ses systèmes de valeurs et ses critères de jugement, non pas directement par exposition instantanée au tout de l'espèce humaine, mais à travers un groupe, une société avec sa langue, sa culture, son histoire, ses traditions. Et pour chaque société, une tradition faite de mythes et de rites a toujours joué un rôle déterminant dans le façonnement de son ensemble de valeurs et de normes. Même les traditions humanistes et laïques ne sont pas neutres et les mêmes partout : la sécularisation est toujours une réaction contre une tradition religieuse et politique particulière et c'est pourquoi elle n'a pas la même signification et le même contenu partout.

C'est à partir de cette réalité intermédiaire du groupe que l'on peut concevoir une autre sorte d'universalité et en fait commencer à la construire. Non pas abstraitement et théoriquement à partir d'un système unique de principes, mais dans une existence commune possible malgré des croyances en des valeurs différentes. Cette existence commune est rendue nécessaire plus encore maintenant qu'autrefois par le caractère pluraliste de nos sociétés où des personnes se référant à des croyances et à des systèmes de valeurs différents sont forcées de vivre ensemble.

\*

Pour voir comment une telle universalité pratique est possible et peut être construite pas à pas, nous devons donc examiner comment se sont constitués ces différents systèmes de valeurs et de normes, ce qui leur est commun et en quoi ils diffèrent, dans une espèce de généalogie de l'éthique, comme j'ai tenté de le faire dans un ouvrage précédent<sup>2</sup>.

Il s'agit au départ d'expériences du bien et du mal comme plaisir et douleur, c'est-à-dire ce qui fait du bien, donne du bien être et ce qui fait du mal, qui fait souffrir. Ces expériences sont universelles en tant que communes à l'espèce humaine et aussi en ce que le descriptif et le normatif y sont unis d'emblée : la perception de la douleur déclenche spontanément le désir de l'éviter et celle du bien être le désir de le conserver ou de le rechercher, ce qui n'est pas toujours automatiquement le cas comme on le sait de ce que nous jugeons bien ou mal moralement.

De toute évidence, ces expériences premières bien qu'universelles et fondamentales, ne suffisent pas pour rendre compte de la nature et du contenu de nos jugements moraux et de l'existence de différents systèmes de valeurs. C'est pourquoi certains répugnent à y voir même quelque rapport que ce soit avec le domaine de l'éthique, comme si celui-ci ne devrait être - on ne sait pourquoi - que de l'ordre du spirituel. Plusieurs langues ont gardé le souvenir de ces fondements en utilisant les mêmes mots, « bien » et « mal », dans les deux domaines : de la morale, quand il s'agit de *faire* le bien ou le mal, et de la sensation du plaisir et de la douleur, où l'on subit le mal et où l'on jouit du bien-être.

Mais avec le développement des capacités cognitives propres à l'espèce humaine les sensations de plaisir et de douleur sont transformées en expériences du bien et du mal. Et c'est là que les choses commencent à se compliquer quand la mémoire et l'imagination projettent les expériences passées sur l'avenir et sur d'autres corps d'individus qui nous ressemblent. Alors, par là, nous savons ou croyons savoir qu'un bien présent peut produire un mal à venir, soit pour nous soit pour d'autres ; et qu'inversement un mal présent peut produire un bien plus grand pour nous-mêmes ou pour d'autres.

C'est ainsi que les sensations immédiates de plaisir et de douleur, telles que nous pouvons les partager avec d'autres espèces animales, sont transformées en bien et mal, objets de jugement moral. À partir de là, nous ne pouvons plus nous contenter de satisfaire simplement et immédiatement notre désir de jouir de tout plaisir qui s'offre et d'éviter toute peine. Nous sommes forcés de développer des stratégies pour *différer* la satisfaction immédiate du désir, en vue d'un bien plus grand, ou pour éviter un mal encore plus grand. C'est ce qu'avait d'ailleurs bien vu Epicure lui-même quand il écrivait que « c'est par une sage considération de l'avantage et du désagrément qu'il procure que chaque plaisir doit être apprécié. Car, dans certains cas, nous traitons le bien comme un mal et en d'autres le mal comme un bien<sup>3</sup> ». La question est bien sûr : d'où vient cette « sage considération » qui est censée nous guider dans nos choix? C'est évidemment tout le problème. Pour le philosophe, c'est la définition même de la sagesse qui tient compte, d'une façon ou d'une autre, d'une certaine ontologie et d'une conception de la nature humaine. Mais dans la plupart des cas, nos comportements individuels et sociaux sont faits de stratégies visant à satisfaire ou différer nos désirs, stratégies qui sont très largement le produit de notre éducation. Il s'agit de normes de comportement qui nous disent, *pour différentes sortes de*

*désirs, comment et de combien leur satisfaction doit être différée.* Car, d'un côté, chaque désir ne peut pas être satisfait instantanément, à la façon qui semble être celle des animaux et des bébés; mais, d'un autre côté, il n'est pas possible de différer indéfiniment et en toute circonstance, même à travers des processus de répression et de sublimation. Comme le disent les *Proverbes de Salomon*<sup>4</sup> : « Un souhait différé est une maladie du cœur, un désir qui vient est un arbre de vie. » Or, à cette question de *quand, comment et de combien différer la satisfaction d'un désir*, les réponses sont différentes dans différentes sociétés et différentes traditions. Et ces réponses sont précisément ce qui *définit pratiquement* les notions de bien et de mal, telles qu'elles ont été produites par l'histoire de chaque société en relation avec les individus qui la composent.

En fait, la situation est encore plus compliquée car, en plus de la mémoire et de l'imagination de nos états de conscience habituels, nous faisons aussi, à des degrés divers, l'expérience de certains états, dits « états modifiés de conscience », dont on a vu qu'ils étaient probablement à l'origine de la notion de *sacré*. Les anthropologistes et les ethnobotanistes connaissent le rôle des rêves et des plantes hallucinogènes dans certaines religions anciennes. Ce rôle s'est perpétué jusqu'à nos jours dans certains cas, comme dans le *Dreamland* des Aborigènes d'Australie, ou chez les Indiens d'Amérique et certains peuples africains, tandis qu'il était réprimé comme démoniaque en Europe et en Asie où le chamanisme extatique a été pratiquement éradiqué. Mais en même temps, dans les religions occidentales, certains de ces états modifiés de conscience ont été décrits comme étant ceux de prophètes et de mystiques.

Ceci nous ramène à l'observation que l'origine des systèmes sociaux de normes de comportements a toujours été religieuse d'une façon ou d'une autre, et qu'il est probable que les rituels inspirés par la mémoire et l'imagination de ces deux mondes, ou deux réalités de conscience, profane et sacré, furent à l'origine des systèmes normatifs dont nous avons hérité.

Quoi qu'il en soit, la morale pratique ou éthique appliquée apparaît concrètement comme une stratégie visant à différer le désir, et son domaine est déjà celui du jugement réflexif où le bien et le mal ne sont plus immédiatement perçus comme le bon et le douloureux. La pulsion instinctive de l'animal et du bébé est transformée, par des contenus divers de connaissance à la fois rationnelle et imaginative. Ainsi, à partir de l'expérience universelle du plaisir et de la douleur,



nous nous retrouvons avec différents systèmes de normes, qui sont autant de façons différentes de nous représenter nos expériences du bien et du mal à travers notre mémoire, notre imagination et nos expériences du sacré, individuelles et collectives.

Mais à ce stade, nous devons considérer à nouveau la question de l'Universel. Devant la diversité des systèmes de normes que différentes sociétés et différentes cultures ont développés, la question se pose : « Existe-t-il un critère universel qui nous dirait si un système de valeurs et de normes est moralement meilleur ou pire qu'un autre ? » Autrement dit, nous voulons maintenant porter des jugements moraux sur les jugements moraux. Mais la difficulté avec cette question d'un critère universel, parfois appelé méta-éthique, est que même si quelques penseurs se mettaient d'accord sur un tel critère, il est peu probable qu'il serait accepté volontiers par toutes les sociétés existantes, et notamment par celles qui seraient jugées moralement inférieures sur la base de ce critère. Un tel critère devrait être imposé par la force, comme ce fut souvent le cas dans le passé. Mais il serait alors autodestructeur, puisqu'un système moral imposé par la force peut difficilement être considéré comme moral, et certainement pas reconnu comme tel universellement. C'est pourquoi, quand différentes cultures se confrontent, avec des valeurs et des normes différentes, la seule façon d'atteindre une universalité réelle ne peut pas être imposée d'en haut, mais construite pas à pas par l'argumentation, à propos de situations pratiques. Dans chaque cas particulier, telle ou telle pratique doit-elle être permise, et dans quelles conditions?

Il n'y a aucune garantie, bien entendu, que l'on puisse toujours se mettre d'accord. Quelques exemples montrent bien à quel point cela peut être difficile. La question de l'avortement divise encore beaucoup de sociétés. Celle de l'excision rituelle des filles est l'objet d'une forte opposition entre nos cultures occidentales et certaines traditions africaines.

Nous devons d'abord accepter que différentes personnes, différentes cultures apportent des réponses contradictoires à ces questions. Mais ce n'est que le début d'une argumentation. Ensuite, *chacun* essaiera d'expliquer son attitude de façon telle que l'autre puisse la comprendre même si il ou elle ne l'approuve pas. En cours de route, chacun peut être conduit à mieux analyser en profondeur sa propre position. Petit à petit, des attitudes opposées peuvent se rapprocher et arriver à une sorte d'accord ou de compromis.

Encore une fois, il n'y a pas de garantie de succès. Mais nous connaissons quelques cas de succès relatif: la Déclaration universelle des droits de l'homme en est un exemple. Cet accord n'est pas dénué d'ambiguïtés et de malentendus puisque différentes cultures semblent apprécier différemment ce que l'on entend par droits de l'homme. Il n'en reste pas moins qu'un accord existe sur l'interdiction de certaines pratiques telles que l'esclavage, la torture, les abus d'enfants, les génocides et crimes contre l'humanité, etc., malgré l'existence de ces ambiguïtés. En fait, il est même probable que c'est grâce à ces ambiguïtés et malentendus qu'un accord a pu être réalisé. Même si l'on observe des transgressions de ces interdictions, c'est comme telles qu'elles sont jugées et éventuellement condamnées.

Un autre exemple est celui de ce qu'on peut appeler la morale de l'indignation à l'origine des mouvements humanitaires. Les médias nous mettent littéralement sous les yeux la souffrance d'autrui et c'est là que le premier niveau de l'éthique, qui n'avait jamais disparu, peut réapparaître. Il est relativement facile de s'accorder sur ce que nous appelons le mal, devant l'exposition de la souffrance. D'où l'existence de larges mouvements d'opinion comme effets d'une éthique minimale, au niveau le plus immédiatement et le plus universellement accessible: l'indignation devant la souffrance.

Bien entendu, il s'agit d'une morale un peu infantile de l'ici et maintenant, du sentiment produit par l'image dans l'instant de sa perception, où une image chasse l'autre, morale de *l'underdog* où celui qui souffre a forcément raison même s'il a tort dans la durée; avec les possibilités de manipulation de l'information en jouant sur les perversions du chantage au sentiment. Mais enfin, c'est un premier niveau qui constitue parfois au minimum un lieu de rencontre où le dialogue peut commencer.

Enfin, dans la pratique des comités d'éthique, nous observons aussi comment se traitent, au cas par cas, des problèmes de coexistence entre cultures différentes, quand le dialogue et la négociation sont admis *a priori* comme seuls moyens de résoudre les conflits.

À ce propos, je voudrais conclure par une observation curieuse qui permet un optimisme relatif. Contrairement à ce que l'on croit sur le fonctionnement d'une pensée rationnelle déductive qui pose des principes et en tire des conclusions, il est beaucoup plus facile de s'accorder sur des conclusions que sur les raisonnements qui y conduisent. Souvent, devant une question particulière - est-il admissible d'appliquer telle ou telle technique dans telle ou telle situation? -, nous arrivons assez vite à nous mettre d'accord sur une conduite qui nous semble la plus appropriée. Mais alors il vaudrait presque mieux ne pas demander pourquoi. Car nous voyons vite que nous ne sommes pas d'accord sur les raisons qui nous ont conduit à cette même conclusion. Ce phénomène curieux au premier abord, qu'il est plus facile de s'accorder sur une conclusion que sur la façon d'y arriver, peut être théorisé comme un cas particulier de ce que l'on appelle la sous détermination des théories par les faits, ou sous détermination des modèles par les observations. Sans pouvoir entrer ici dans les détails, on peut en comprendre l'idée intuitivement en réalisant que plus on a affaire à une question particulière et plus le nombre de réponses possibles se réduit. À la limite, il n'y a que deux ou trois possibilités : oui, non, ou à certaines conditions; alors que le nombre de raisonnements possibles pour y arriver est beaucoup plus grand, chacun d'eux dépendant d'un ensemble différent d'axiomes, de principes, de croyances. Autrement dit, comme j'ai pu l'observer en construisant des modèles de réseaux immunitaires, dans le processus de prise de décision comme dans un système dynamique relativement complexe le nombre d'attracteurs possibles vers lesquels le système peut converger est beaucoup plus petit que le nombre de modèles et de chemins pour y arriver. Cette sous détermination se superpose à un autre phénomène qui lui ressemble mais qui fonctionne parfois en direction opposée. C'est *l'overlapping consensus* (ou "consensus par recouvrement") analysé par John Rawls. Des principes généraux et des valeurs fondamentales peuvent être justifiés à partir de visions du monde très différentes que Rawls appelle des méta-principes. Par exemple, la démocratie et les droits de l'homme dans une société bouddhiste peuvent être justifiés comme valeurs fondamentales par le souci de la non-violence plutôt que par celui de l'égalité et de la dignité des personnes comme en Occident. Mais, comme nous l'avons vu en commençant, un même principe, éventuellement à l'intérieur d'une même religion, peut diverger vers des applications différentes ou même contradictoires quand il s'agit de situations concrètes particulières. De ce point de vue, la convergence à partir de motivations et de principes différents vers des

conclusions identiques fonctionne en direction opposée et complète en quelque sorte le consensus par recouvrement.

Ces observations permettent un certain optimisme quant aux chances de succès dans cette recherche d'une forme d'universalisme pragmatique en construction.

Encore une fois, il n'existe aucune garantie que ce dialogue entre cultures, ou même entre attitudes opposées à l'intérieur de la même culture, comme sur la question de l'avortement, n'aboutisse pas à un échec et éventuellement à la violence et même la guerre. Mais c'est la seule façon de tendre vers l'universalité dans la pratique et pas seulement dans la pensée de quelques individus.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> R. Kamenetz, *Le Juif dans le lotus. Des rabbins chez les lamas*, (1994) trd. fr. B. Cohen, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> H. Atlan, *Les Etincelles de hasard, tome 2: L'athéisme de l'écriture*, chapitre II "Les niveaux de l'éthique. Pour une généalogie", Paris, Seuil, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> *Lettre à Ménécée*, d'après Diogène Laërce, *Vie, Doctrines et Sentences des philosophes illustres*, Paris, Flammarion, 1965, I.H, p. 261.

<sup>4</sup> *Proverbes de Salomon*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1993, 13, 12.

## **Interreligious dialogue: Still a controversial topic in the Catholic Church**

Gregory Baum  
McGill University

**Abstract:** Since the Abrahamic religions present themselves as bearers of the truth and divide the world into believers and infidels, interreligious dialogue has been a challenge for them. Yet reflecting on the grave divisions in today's world, many believers in these religions have become convinced that their faith call for interreligious peace, dialogue and mutual understanding. In the Catholic Church, the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) expressed respect for the world religions, admired many of their moral values and recommended interreligious dialogue. The newly-created Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue urged dialogue on four levels: 1) the dialogue of the street, practised by ordinary people, 2) dialogue in view of common action, 3) dialogue on the level of theology and 4) dialogue about prayer and the spiritual life. While Pope John Paul II had strongly supported interreligious dialogue, his successor, Benedict XVI, has been rather reticent. Already in the year 2000, as Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect of the Roman *Congregatio de doctrina fidei*, he published the instruction '*Dominus Jesus*' which complained that the emphasis on dialogue was undermining the Church's mission to convert the world to faith in Jesus Christ. According to the Cardinal, dialogue brackets the truth question and thus has no clearly defined purpose. Even as Benedict XVI, the Pope has repeated the same message. According to him, interreligious dialogue has become necessary because of the process of globalisation, but for Catholic this dialogue must always be carried on within the horizon of the world's conversion to Jesus Christ. Many Catholic theologians strongly disagree with the present Pope on this issue. They regard as unethical an invitation to dialogue with people of another religion with the hidden intention of persuading them to become Christian. These theologians share the conviction of John Paul II that the purpose of dialogue is simply mutual understanding. In this process the participants listen to one another, purify their own religious inheritance and embrace anew the fundamental values of their own faith. Dialogue is a process that transforms all participants: it prompts them to re-appropriate their own tradition by emphasizing its teaching on love, justice and peace. Yet since interreligious dialogue is a recent development, it is not surprising that it is still a debated topic within the Catholic Church.

**Key words:** *Catholic Church, Second Vatican Council, interreligious dialogue, theology, Abrahamic religions*

**Résumé :** Étant donné que les religions Abrahamiques se présentent comme porteuses de la vérité et divisent le monde entre croyants et infidèles, le dialogue interreligieux a été pour elles un véritable défi. Si l'on étudie les divisions graves dans le monde d'aujourd'hui, des nombreux croyants dans ces religions sont persuadés que leur foi appelle pour la paix interreligieuse, le dialogue et l'entendement mutuel. Dans l'Église catholique, le Concile Vatican II (1962-1965) a exprimé son respect pour le monde religieux, appréciant plusieurs de ses valeurs morales et préconisant le dialogue interreligieux. Le Conseil Pontifical nouvellement créé pour le dialogue interreligieux a

exhorté à promouvoir le dialogue à quatre niveaux : 1) Celui de la rue, pratiqué par les gens ordinaires, 2) Le dialogue en vue d'une action commune 3) sur le niveau de la théologie 4) et sur la prière et la vie spirituelle. Alors que le pape Jean-Paul II avait fortement soutenu le dialogue interreligieux, son successeur, Benoît XVI, a été plutôt réticent. Déjà en l'an 2000, le Cardinal Ratzinger, préfet de la *Congregatio de doctrina fidei*, publie l'instruction '*Dominus Jesus*' qui a désapprouvé l'accent mis sur le dialogue, qui touche naturellement à la mission de l'Église, convertir la foi vers Jésus Christ. Selon le Cardinal, le dialogue calibre la question de vérité et n'a donc aucun objectif clairement défini. Même Benedict XVI, en tant que Pape, a exprimé le même avis. Selon lui, le dialogue interreligieux est devenu nécessaire en raison du processus de mondialisation, mais pour les catholiques ce dialogue doit toujours être guidé par l'idée de la conversion mondiale vers le Seigneur Jésus-Christ. Des nombreux théologiens catholiques sont fortement en désaccord avec le Pape actuel sur cette question. Ils considèrent comme immorale une invitation au dialogue avec les personnes d'une autre religion, ayant l'intention dissimulée de les convaincre de devenir chrétiens. Ces théologiens partagent la conviction de Jean Paul II laquelle préconise que l'objectif du dialogue est simplement une compréhension mutuelle. Dans ce processus, les participants écoutent l'autre, épurent leur propre patrimoine religieux et adoptent fraîchement les valeurs fondamentales de leur propre foi rattachées à l'amour, la justice et la paix. Sa portée relativement nouvelle fait du dialogue entre les religions un sujet encore soumis au débat au sein de l'Église Catholique.

**Mots clés :** *Église Catholique, Concile Vatican II, dialogue interreligieux, religions Abrahamiques.*

Religions are dynamic cultural movements capable of responding in new ways to the challenges of history. Religions reside in hermeneutic communities that, in new historical circumstances, return to their foundational experiences and read their sacred texts to discover in them inspiration for a renewed self-understanding. It is thus possible for traditional religions to become critically open to modernity while remaining faithful to the substance of their faith. The sociologist Robert Bellah edited a book in 1965 that analyzed the responses of South Asian religions to the conditions of modernity.<sup>1</sup> Bellah noted two different reactions of these religions. Exposed to the challenge of modernity, one reaction was a rigid clinging to the inherited religious practices — Bellah called this the turn to neo-traditionalism —, while the other reaction led to rereading the sacred texts, reforming the tradition and re-interpreting the religious substance. Bellah's remarkable insight in 1965 has been verified by subsequent developments: on the one hand, the emergence of fundamentalist currents in all the religions, and on the other, a movement in all the religions to strive for interreligious cooperation in support of the common good of humanity.

### **The Declaration *Nostra aetate***

A positive, faith-based response to modernity happened in the Catholic Church at Vatican Council II (1962-1965). Thanks to a doctrinal evolution, based on the antecedent work of exegetes and theologians, the Catholic Church changed its relationship to the world, to the other Churches and to the world religions. It is this latter change that concerns us in the present article. Since the conciliar declaration *Nostra aetate*<sup>2</sup> offers a new teaching, quite singular in Christian history, I wish to quote from it at some length.

From ancient times down to the present, there is found among various peoples a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things

and over the events of human history; at times some indeed have come to the recognition of a Supreme Being, or even of a Father. This perception and recognition penetrates their lives with a profound religious sense.

Religions, however, that are bound up with an advanced culture have struggled to answer the same questions by means of more refined concepts and a more developed language. Thus in Hinduism, men contemplate the divine mystery and express it through an inexhaustible abundance of myths and through searching philosophical inquiry. They seek freedom from the anguish of our human condition either through ascetical practices or profound meditation or a flight to God with love and trust. Again, Buddhism, in its various forms, realizes the radical insufficiency of this changeable world; it teaches a way by which men, in a devout and confident spirit, may be able either to acquire the state of perfect liberation, or attain, by their own efforts or through higher help, supreme illumination. Likewise, other religions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing "ways," comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites.

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth

The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons and daughters that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.

The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all- powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to



even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the Day of Judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.

A special chapter of *Nostra aetate* redefines the Church's relationship to Judaism and the Jews. Reflecting on the Holocaust, Christians recognized with repentance the anti-Jewish rhetoric built into Christian preaching almost from the beginning. In the past, Christians cited certain New Testament texts to show that God's covenant with the Jews was abrogated when they refused to recognize Jesus as their messiah. The Church thus looked upon the Jews as excluded from divine grace. Citing other New Testament texts, the Vatican Council now recognizes that God's ancient covenant with Israel retains its validity and is a source of grace and wisdom for the Synagogue. There is thus no theological justification for a mission to convert Jews to the Christian faith. Instead, Catholics are encouraged to engage in dialogue and cooperation with them.

Interreligious dialogue is something new in the Church's history. In the past, there were occasions for interreligious debates where Christians and followers of other religions tried to convince one another that they alone held the truth. Interreligious dialogue is something quite different. It is not an argument about who is right and who is wrong. The aim of interreligious dialogue is mutual understanding, the exploration of common values, the fostering of cooperation, and the spiritual enrichment of all participants.

## **Theological justification**

How did the Church arrive at this new openness? It is well known that the Catholic Church regards Jesus Christ as the universal Savior and sees itself as the bearer of God's revealed truth. It is therefore necessary to ask the question whether the new openness is a purely diplomatic gesture, a convenient compromise in a difficult situation, or whether it is a theologically grounded response derived from the substance of the Christian faith.

This question deserves a detailed reply. Here I simply wish to summarize in a single paragraph the theological reasoning that persuaded the Church to honor the world religions. We note that in the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel it says that the Word of God was with God, and was God, and took on human flesh in Jesus (John 1: 1,14). It also says that the Word of God addresses every human being entering this world (John 1: 9). The Christian authors of the early centuries, especially in Egypt, attached great importance to these texts. They held that God's Word, incarnate in Jesus, resounded throughout the whole of history and had spoken in particular to the ancient Greek philosophers. These philosophers enjoyed great wisdom because God's Word had addressed them in their hearts. Clement of Alexandria famously said, "Saint Socrates, pray for us!" That the divine Spirit addresses the whole of humanity and is present in the wisdom mediated by the cultures and the religions of the world is thus an ancient Christian teaching that was neglected in subsequent centuries. Thomas Aquinas reaffirmed it in the Middle Ages, and it was given central importance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Catholic theologians such as Karl Rahner and Henri de Lubac. Thanks to their work, Vatican Council II endorsed this message.

Pope John Paul II confirmed this message in his encyclical *Redemptoris missio* of 1990.

The Holy Spirit manifests himself in a special way in the Church and in her members. Yet his presence and activity are universal, limited neither by space nor time,... The Spirit is at the very source of the human person's existential and religious questioning which is occasioned not only by contingent situations, but by the very structure of its being. The Spirit's presence and activity affects not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions. Indeed, the Holy Spirit is at the origin of the noble ideals and undertakings which benefit humanity in its journey through history.<sup>3</sup>

Some people have suggested that this generosity is really a new form of Catholic imperialism: here the claim is made that the Christian God, the Holy Spirit, is involved in the prayers, the virtues and the good works of people in all religions. I do not see it that way. I hold rather that to be open to religious pluralism a universal religion must be able to respect this plurality in terms of its own theology. Progressive Muslim thinkers follow the same path. Tariq Ramadan, a Muslim *ulama* I greatly respect, argues in similar fashion that all people surrendered to God's will, wherever they may be, are in fact Muslims.<sup>4</sup> Islam as a universal religion is able to appreciate other religions in terms of its own theology.

### **The Instruction *Dominus Jesus***

Some conservative Catholics are disturbed by the Church's new openness. While they accept the teaching of Vatican Council II, they are afraid that an emphasis on the new teaching will foster a relativism that regards all religions as equally true. This has been the fear of Cardinal Ratzinger who, in 2005, became Pope Benedict XVI. As Prefect of the Vatican Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, he published in 2000 the Instruction *Dominus Jesus*,<sup>5</sup> reaffirming Roman Catholicism as the one true religion. The Instruction followed the letter of Vatican Council II, yet reflected a different spirit. While the Council emphasizes the truth and values the Catholic Church shares with other traditions and only then states how this Church differs from these others, *Dominus Jesus* stresses first the difference between the Catholic truth and the teaching of other traditions and recognizes only later the truths and values shared by all. The Instruction emphasizes that non-Catholic Churches are in various ways defective and non-Christian religions are marked in various ways by error. We are even told that religious pluralism exists only in fact and not in principle, because in principle there exists only one true religion, the faith of Roman Catholicism. The Instruction raises serious questions regarding interreligious dialogue: it may encourage Catholics to believe that all religions are equally true and undermine the Church's mission to proclaim the name of Jesus. The Instruction insists that for the Catholic participants, interreligious dialogue is an integral part of the Church's evangelizing mission.

Ecumenical Catholics received this Instruction like a cold shower. They argued that it is unethical to invite followers of another religion to a trusting dialogue with a carefully-disguised intention of persuading them to become Catholic. Catholic theologians also argued that it was religious absolutism, not religious relativism, that was the greater danger in today's world, unsettled by fundamentalist currents in all religious traditions. Catholic theologians also argued that even if a religion sees itself as the bearer of the one, universally valid truth, this does not entitle individual believers to think that they have the perfect grasp of this truth. In religion, truth is not something that you possess, like information; in religion, truth is something that possesses you, something that is bigger than you and lays hold of you, something that transcends human understanding. For this reason, believers remain learner all their lives.

I conclude that the Instruction *Dominus Jesus* has made the conflict between dialogue and proclamation one of the important issues presently debated in the Catholic Church.

### **Benedict XVI**

Pope Benedict XVI himself does not appear quite certain of how to resolve this conflict. I have analyzed his statements on this issue in a number of essays.<sup>6</sup> Notorious is a lecture he gave in Regensburg, Germany, in 2006, in which argued that Catholics and Muslims do not worship the same God, a position at odds with Vatican Council II and the repeated affirmation of Pope John Paul II. Benedict XVI was severely criticized for his remark by Muslim religious thinkers and knowledgeable Catholic theologians. A few months later, during his visit to Turkey, Benedict XVI changed his mind. In a speech delivered before

a Muslim audience,<sup>7</sup> he first quoted the words of Pope Gregory VII addressed in 1076 to a Muslim prince in North Africa, recalling the love that Christians and Muslims owe to one another “because we believe in one God, albeit in a different manner, and because we praise him and worship him every day as the Creator and Ruler of the world.” Benedict then made his own the words of John Paul II spoken on his visit to Ankara in November 28, 1979:

I wonder if it is not urgent, precisely today when Christian and Muslims have entered a new period of history, to recognise and develop the spiritual bonds that unite us, in order to preserve and promote together, for the benefit of all humans, ‘peace, liberty, social justice and moral values.’

Benedict went even further: he suggested that Muslims and Christians have a common mission to give witness to God in a world that is becoming increasingly secular. “We are called to work together, so as to help society to open itself to the transcendent, giving Almighty God his rightful place.”

It is puzzling that about a year later, on December 3, 2007, the Vatican Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith published a Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization, that repeated the message of *Dominus Jesus*. We are told again that Catholics must not forget that interreligious dialogue is part of the Church’s evangelizing mission and that their participation in interreligious dialogue must be guided by the intention to lead their partners to the Christian faith. The Doctrinal Note criticizes interreligious dialogue that simply fosters mutual understanding and active cooperation in the pursuit of peace and justice. Yet this is precisely the dialogue that Benedict XVI encouraged and even urged in his speech delivered in Turkey.

In June 2009, on his visit to the Holy Land, Benedict XVI, speaking to a group of Jews, Muslims and Christians made a passionate appeal for interreligious dialogue and justified it in theological terms.<sup>8</sup> In the past he had repeatedly said that interreligious dialogue was problematic because it bracketed the truth question; he now claims that in this dialogue all participants are committed to the truth, the practical truth that enables them to live together in mutual respect and cooperation. This quest is not inspired by worldly prudence in search of diplomatic compromise; it is motivated, according to Benedict, by the religious commitment of the participants, for all of them, Jews, Muslims and Christians, find in the One God the source of their desire for unity and peace. Here is one paragraph of his speech.

Some would have us believe that our differences are necessarily a cause of division and thus at most to be tolerated. A few even maintain that our voices should simply be silenced. But we know that our differences need never be misrepresented as an inevitable source of friction or tension either between ourselves or in society at large. Rather, they provide a wonderful opportunity for people of different religions to live together in profound respect, esteem and appreciation, encouraging one another in the ways of God. ... Prompted by the Almighty and enlightened by his truth, may you continue to step forward with courage, respecting all that differentiates us and promoting all that unites us as creatures blessed with the desire to bring hope to our communities and world.

Still, the conflict between dialogue and proclamation has not yet been fully resolved in the Catholic Church. The Vatican Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith still censures theologians who appreciate religious pluralism as a precious gift of divine providence, arguing that the Church has much to learn from dialogue with the world religions.<sup>9</sup>

## **Catholics and Jews**

Conservative voices in the Catholic Church still oppose the positive appreciation of contemporary Judaism articulated in *Nostra aetate*. The decision of Benedict XVI to allow the celebration of the pre-conciliar Latin liturgy, the so-called Tridentine Mass, restored the traditional orations of Good Friday, in which the Church prayed for the conversion of heretics, Jews and pagans, referring to them in terms expressing contempt.<sup>10</sup> Many Catholics and Jews, critical of the restoration of the ancient texts, raised the question whether the Church is moving away from the teaching of Vatican Council II. On his visit in Jerusalem, Benedict said this to the two Chief Rabbis of Israel: “Today I have the opportunity to repeat that the Catholic Church is irrevocably committed to the path chosen at the Second Vatican Council for a genuine and lasting reconciliation between Christians and Jews.”

But is this definitive? In 2002, a group of Catholic and Jewish scholars in the US published a document in two sections, called “Reflections on Covenant and Mission,”<sup>11</sup> that was well received by the American bishops. The Catholic section interpreted *Nostra aetate* and subsequent Vatican statements on the Jews to say that God’s covenant with the Jews remains valid and that the mission to convert the Jews has thus lost its theological legitimacy. Yet conservative Catholic circles in the US opposed this conclusion. Challenged by them, the American bishops decided to publish a notice on June 18, 2009, to clear up the ambiguity, declaring that Jesus Christ is the saviour of humanity, including the Jews, and that Catholics in dialogue with them may not hide this message from them.<sup>12</sup> When Catholic and Jewish scholars expressed their dismay over this notice, a



group of five Catholic bishops published a statement on October 2, 2009, in which they confirm the teaching of Vatican Council II, honor present-day Jewish covenantal life as a vital witness to God's saving will, and declare that Catholic-Jewish dialogue is not and will never be a disguise for inviting Jews to believe in Jesus, even if Catholics believe that he, their Lord, is the universal savior.<sup>13</sup> Is this the end of the debate? I doubt it.

### **The Church's Pastoral Practice**

While the conflict between dialogue and proclamation may not have been resolved in theological terms, it has in many situations been settled in practical terms. In the Church's history practice has often precedes theory.

The presence of Asian and African immigrants in Western societies, many of whom faithful to their inherited religion, has raised important questions for the Christian Churches. What policy should they adopt in regard to the non-Christian newcomers? In Europe the Christian Churches, including the Catholic Church, appointed the Islam-in-Europe Committee to study the issue and suggest appropriate pastoral policies.<sup>14</sup> The Committee eventually recommended that the Churches urge their members to respect the Muslim faith of the new immigrants, help them to be accepted and integrated in their new society, and defend them against the widely held prejudice in regard to Islam. While the Churches in North Americas did not institute such a formal procedure, their pastoral practice is the same. They make no effort to convert the new immigrants: they respect their religious traditions, denounce racism and religious prejudice, and demand justice and fairness in their name.

Small Evangelical groups on university campuses and in other parts may try to convert the followers of other religions, but the major Churches categorically refuse to do so. This does not mean, of course, that if a follower of another religion wishes to become a Christian, the Churches would refuse to accept him or her. Because such conversions occur occasionally, the Churches in Germany have produced a ritual of reception that encourages the candidates for baptism to remain faithful to the high values of their religious inheritance.

Influenced by the multicultural policy of the Canadian government, the Canadian Churches have a special sympathy for the religious cultures brought by the recent immigrants and raise their voices to protect them against popular prejudice. In response to a wave of hostility to Muslims after September 11, 2001, the Canadian Catholic bishops published a statement on October 4, 2001, in which they “deeply deplored the crimes of hate toward the mosques and toward Arab people whether Muslim or Christian” and reaffirmed “the respect that Catholic should toward Islam and its adherents.”

The Canadian Catholic Church is particularly welcoming to the new religious pluralism. The bishops of Quebec published a theological and pastoral Note in June 2005 to guide Catholics in their appreciation of the various religious traditions present in Quebec.<sup>15</sup> The bishops want to promote a fraternal society in which people of different religions and of no religion respect one another. Because Catholics believing in Jesus as the universal Saviour, they reject a religious relativism that regards all religions as equally true, yet

Catholics also reject a religious absolutism that recognizes no truth and no values outside of their own tradition. The Catholic response to religious pluralism, we are told, is interreligious dialogue and cooperation. The Note of the bishops on interreligious relations is more profound than any other official Catholic statement I have found. It is worth mentioning that Cardinal Ratzinger/Benedict XVI who has condemned religious relativism in the strongest terms, has never clearly articulated his rejection of religious absolutism.

In a booklet produced by the diocese of Montreal, entitled “Proposer aujourd’hui Jésus Christ, we read this appreciation of religious pluralism.<sup>16</sup>

Le pluralisme religieux présent à Montréal, polyphonie des voix des chercheurs de Dieu, peut susciter le désir de bien connaître sa partition et de reconnaître les langues multiples de l’Esprit. Le premier effet de la pratique du dialogue des religions est de conduire les unes et les autres au meilleur d’elles-mêmes, à mettre en valeur ce qu’elles ont d’humanisant et à atténuant les aspects intransigeants. L’Esprit nous attend d’abord dans une pratique de la cordialité. Pourvue qu’elles aident l’être humain à grandir, des différentes religions peuvent être considérées d’authentiques manifestations de la sollicitude de Dieu.

This beautiful text is an appropriate conclusion of my reflections on the Catholic Church’s reaction to religious pluralism.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rober Bellah, "Epilogue: Religion and Progress in Southern Asia," in Robert Bellah, ed., *Religion and Progress in Modern Asia* (New York: Free Press, 1965) 168-229

<sup>2</sup> [://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html) (accessed Oct. 15, 2009)

<sup>3</sup> [://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_07121990\\_redemptoris-missio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio_en.html), par. 28 (accessed Oct. 15, 2009)

<sup>4</sup> Gregory Baum, *The Theology of Tariq Ramadan* (Toronto: Novalis/ Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009) 66

<sup>5</sup> [://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20000806\\_dominus-iesus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html) (accessed Oct. 15, 2009)

<sup>6</sup> Gregory Baum, *Sign of the Times* (Toronto: Novalis, 2007) 121-144.

<sup>7</sup> [://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2006/november/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20061128\\_pres-religious-affairs\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/november/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20061128_pres-religious-affairs_en.html). (accessed Oct. 15, 2005) Also Gregory Baum, "Proclamation or Dialogue? Unresolved Questions in Pope Benedict's Teaching," *The Ecumenist*, 44(Winter 2007)1-4

<sup>8</sup> [://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2009/may/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20090511\\_dialogo-interreligioso\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2009/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090511_dialogo-interreligioso_en.html) (accessed Oct. 15, 2009) Also Gregory Baum "Benedict's Jerusalem Message on Religious Pluralism" *The Ecumenist*, 46(Summer 2009)1- 4

<sup>9</sup> Anthony de Mello, Jacques Dupuis and Peter Phan

<sup>10</sup> Gilles Routhier, "Adopter la liturgie romaine antérieure à la réforme de 1970," *Cahier de spiritualité ignatienne*, mai-juin 2008, 97-108

<sup>11</sup> For the Catholics section of this document see *The Ecumenist* 39 (Spring 2002)3-6 and for the Jewish section *The Ecumenist*, 40(Fall 2003)6-10.

<sup>12</sup> Jerry Filteau, "Catholic-Jewish Text Under Scrutiny," *National Catholic Reporter*, July 10, 2009, 'Nation', 11

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.uscatholic.org/news/2009/10/us-bishops-clarify-statement-catholic-jewish-dialogue> (accessed Oct. 15, 2009)

<sup>14</sup> Gregory Baum, "The Islam in Europe Committee," *Essays in Honour of Frederik Wisse* (Montreal: Religious Studies, McGill University, 2006) 478-485

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.eveques.qc.ca/documents/2005/20050616f.html>

<sup>16</sup> "Proposer aujourd'hui Jésus Christ," Église Catholique de Montréal (31 mai 2003), page 10

## ***Capillitas: religion, communication and syncretism in small roadside communities in Venezuela***

José Enrique Finol & David Enrique Finol  
Universidad del Zulia

**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the analysis of a small religious and funerary culture practiced alongside Venezuelan roads, where many car accidents cause a great number of deaths every year. After a car accident has caused the death of a person, family members build a small cenotaph known in Venezuela as *capillita*, where a variety of ritual practices are developed. According to family members, the *capillita* has to be built at the exact location where the victim “took his last breath”. This small funerary culture is a vivid expression of rich and complex processes of religious syncretism that combines and integrates elements originally coming from Catholic, Jewish, and African-Venezuelan practices, along with popular agrarian myths and legends. Communication processes sometimes among distant communities, located in different roads and highways, are based on family visits and religious meetings, where messages are exchanged face to face. But *capillitas* are not only funerary monuments where family members and neighbors come to communicate with the deceased, visit and bring candles, flowers, water, liquor and food, they are also signs of warning to passersby and, particularly, to drivers who are usually blamed for car accidents.

**Key words:** *religion, syncretism, communication, Venezuela, socio-semiotics*

**Résumé :** Cette communication se concentre sur l'analyse d'une culture religieuse et funéraire pratiquée aux côtés des routes du Venezuela, où de nombreux accidents de voiture provoquent un grand nombre de décès chaque année. Après qu'un accident de voiture ait causé la mort d'une personne, la famille construit un Cénotaphe connu comme *capillita*, où une variété de pratiques rituelles est développée. Selon les membres de la famille, la *capillita* doit être construit à l'emplacement exact où la victime a «eu son dernier souffle». Cette petite culture funéraire est une expression vivante des processus riches et complexes de syncrétisme religieux qui combine et intègre les éléments à l'origine provenant de pratiques catholiques, juives et afro-vénézuéliennes, avec des mythes et des légendes rurales populaires. Les processus de communication entre les communautés parfois lointaines, situées dans différentes routes et autoroutes, sont basés sur les visites de la famille et des réunions religieuses, où les messages sont échangés face à face. Mais les *capillitas* sont non seulement des monuments funéraires que les membres de la famille et les voisins visitent et dans lesquels ils amènent des bougies, fleurs, de l'eau, boissons alcooliques et aliments, ils sont aussi des signes d'avertissement aux passants, en particulier, aux conducteurs qui sont généralement blâmés pour les accidents de voiture.

**Mots clés :** *religion, syncrétisme, communication, Venezuela, sémiotique sociale.*

*Syncretism and fundamentalism  
can be viewed as opposite  
reactions to the processes of  
modernization and globalization.  
André Droogers (2005)*

We would like to begin with a short story that we learned during a field trip in our research about road *capillitas* in the state of Zulia, at the west side of Venezuela, where we have been carrying out investigations since 1996. But, first, let us tell you that *capillitas* (Spanish for little chapels) are, in fact, no more than cenotaphs built along the Venezuelan roads at the exact place where somebody has died in a car accident. Cenotaphs, as you know, are funerary monuments where there is no body buried. In our research we gathered information about more than four hundred *capillitas* in the western region of Venezuela.



Beautiful semi aerial *capillita* located by the Perijá road in the state of Zulia, Venezuela. Notice de flowers and the vivid colors. March 2009. Foto by David Enrique Finol.

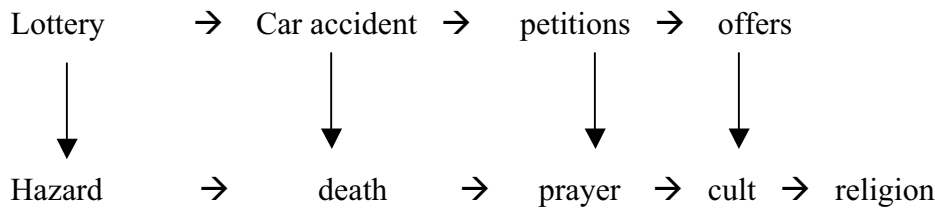
As we said, in 1996 during one of our field trips to the Lara – Zulia highway, we encountered a small *capillita* that had been built to commemorate a man who worked as a lottery salesman. He had died in a car accident a few years before, and the neighbors we interviewed told us that this lottery man use to travel in public transportation between the city of Cabimas, where he sold lottery tickets, and his small road village, where he and his family lived. Every day he travelled in the morning from his village to Cabimas and went back in the afternoon. In one of these trips back home the car where he was travelling was involved in a serious accident and he died. After the usual nine nights of funerary prayers, his family built his *capillita* at the place where the car fell and, therefore, where he, according to his family, *dio su último suspiro* (took his last breath). He was buried at a cemetery in Cabimas.

As usual, every Monday his family went not to the Cabimas city cemetery but to this little cenotaph, to pray and talk to the soul of their beloved, put candles, flowers, water and, in some cases, beer. According to the family, the candles were to help light his way to heaven, the flowers to beautify his way, and water because “when people die in a car accident they die thirsty” so “they come to this place (to the cenotaph) to drink”.

One day, one of the neighbors from the village asked the soul of the deceased lottery salesman to hint him a “winning number”, and, later on, following the example of the former, another neighbor did the same thing. So the custom spread and began to generalize. One day, one of these petitioners won the lottery and, as one can imagine, this first winning confirmed –to his followers- the power of the spirit of the deceased man to make predictions; for others, the power to make “small miracles”, which is the real proof of a soul having special powers over ordinary life. As thanks, every lottery winner will make a ritual offer to the soul in his *capillita*, an act that confirms the beginning of a new road cult.

As we can see in this story, it is the beginning of a small cult that has been growing since. This small example shows the way many *capillitas* have become the center of a particular, long-lasting cult, to which villagers feel attached to. Their initial components may be summarized as follows:



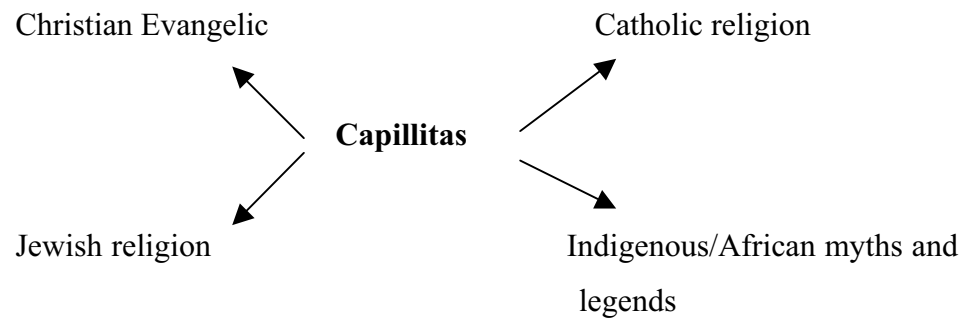


This kind of popular religion is an expression of **a rich syncretic process** in which we were able to identify many influences, and where conflicts and contradictions are solved in order to cope with the stress of ordinary real life, a life marked by frequent and terrible car accidents where members of these small road communities die every day, alongside drivers and passengers.

Syncretic processes may be defined, as McGuire and Maduro point out, as “the mixing of elements of two or more cultures into a combination that is qualitatively different from any of the ‘donor’ cultures” (2005:412); and in spite of prejudices that arise from some institutionalized religions that see syncretic religious practices proper of the “poor”, “superstitious” or “uneducated”, in the end syncretic processes are at the root of all religions and cultures, a conclusion that Shaw and Stewart present like this: Syncretism is a “process by which cultures constitute themselves at any given point in time”(in McGuire and Maduro, 2005: 413). Even if today’s institutionalized religion systems might be more resistant to syncretic processes, they are also, in a large measure, the result of various rich, unattended, unexpected, and lengthy processes of syncretism. As Beyer says, institutionalized religions are “previous and legitimated syncretizations” (2005:417).

As a syncretic process, this religious road cult, that has developed from car accident deaths, and that expresses itself in funerary monuments known as *capillitas*, shows at least four sources of religious content that have mixed in unattended ways.





First of all, there is the main presence of Catholic religion, to which most people state to be attached to. This allegiance appears not only in their catholic beliefs but also in the prayers, particularly the *Padre Nuestro* (Our father) and *Ave María* (Hail Mary), and the saying of the Rosary during the post-wake nine nights of prayers.

Second, there is a growing conversion of people from these road communities to Christian Evangelism, and they have begun to show differences with Catholic people in their views towards *capillitas*, since theoretically they do not believe in their construction as funerary monuments to which, at least formally, they attach no religious value. According to members of the Roca Firme Baptist Church, when people die they just go to heaven or to hell but nothing remains in that place where the person took their last breath. Nevertheless, we have interviewed members of this religion who, in spite of their belief, have built a *capillita* to their loved ones when they die in car accidents.

Third, there is at least one unexpected Jewish symbol used in the *capillitas* by people who visit these small funerary monuments. That symbol is the small stones left as evidence of the visit, as you can see in the following examples.



Two cenotaphs built at the Falcon-Zulia state road where small stones have been left on the roof as testimony of recent visits. January 2009. Photos by David Enrique Finol.

For us it was hard to see the connection between this ancient Jewish tradition and its use by people who mostly identify themselves as Catholics on small road communities ranging from 30 to 100 people. Finally we discovered that in Coro, capital city of the state of Falcon, in the northwest of Venezuela, there is an old Jewish cemetery, founded in 1832 by a small community of Sephardic Jews who emigrated from the Dutch island of Curaçao, situated off the Venezuelan coast. This cemetery is considered the oldest Jewish cemetery in South America.

So we believe that people from Coro and other neighboring towns learned the use of small stones to mark and symbolize the visit to a tomb, and as an imitation process it begun to spread, slowly, among some Catholics who moved to the villages alongside the roads or went to pay their respects to their loved ones.

When asked about the origin of their ritual of leaving stones over the *capillitas*, people just say that they learned it from their parents or grandparents.

Finally, a fourth source of the religious cult that has grown around the *capillitas* are indigenous-agrarian myths and legends mixed with African practices, brought by slaves, that explain some beliefs and rituals practiced by members of these small road communities. Among the elements from this source, for example, are the beliefs about the need for the soul of the dead to drink water, about the idea that people who die unexpectedly usually die thirsty.

Now, from this religious experience and taking into account the main subjects of this workshop, we have asked ourselves some questions that seem to us pertinent for our discussions. As you can see, we have presented here an example which seems to stand on the opposite side of the process of globalization, since these small communities have no Internet, no cell phones, and no traditional phones; sometimes they receive signals from only a few radio and television stations but no cable TV, and sometimes not even newspapers. But also, these are communities where there are no institutionalized religions since there are no priests and almost no churches.

And yet, we should ask ourselves if their way of living and integrating, of tolerance and understanding, is telling us something about our globalized world and the conflicts and

the intolerance we have witnessed for such a long time. Of course, we are not proposing a return to this way of life. What we are suggesting is an effort to discover and understand the structural mechanisms of communication, of dialogue and understanding, by which, in spite of their differences, in these small communities there are no strong conflicts in daily practical behavior or in matter of religious beliefs.

But also we should ask ourselves about the process of real communication, the one that can be found not only in exchanges of information, but also in sharing of emotions, feelings and common-interest matters, carried out in similar or symmetrical conditions between senders and receivers, as it usually occurs in dialogues; real communication that usually takes place, in these small communities, at dawn or at sunset, and where matters that concerns everyday life are discussed.

Members of these small communities have a strong verbal and visual contact, not only among family members but also among villagers who have usually known each other for a long time, and who frequently marry among them. Is it, maybe, their small size as a community which allows them to better communicate, and by doing so enables them to solve conflicts and misunderstandings?

If so, as a consequence, in our world of highly developed technologies of communication, should we stress the need for improving real communication and not just exchanges of information? Is it that the global world has lost sight of the local? Of its possibilities of close contact and real communication? Shall we stress the importance of building smaller communities even in the center of big cities? Is that possible?

Parker Gumucio states that “current *interreligious* conflicts are, almost without exception around the planet, *intercultural* conflicts and they must be approached as such” (2008:317), something that seems confirmed in the analysis of the funerary culture we have presented here. So, if he is right, the questions are: how to deal with the interrelations between cultures and religions? If the globalized world has succeed in promoting acceptance of different cultures, how to foster acceptance of different religions?

Focusing on religious relationships, is it possible to argue that the life experience of *capillita* builders -where boundaries and limits are weak, and where inclusion is a “natural” way of building religious and social relationships- is at least one of various possible ways of understanding differences, of resolving conflicts, of acceptance and tolerance, of finding similarities instead of differences, of, finally, looking at what unites us instead of what separates us?

And finally, is it possible to conclude from our experience that, in fact, as Drooger says, syncretism and fundamentalism are “opposite reactions” to globalization? And, therefore, the better we know the deep mechanism of syncretism the faster/easier we will achieve integration and understanding?

## References

- Beyer, P. (2005) Au croisement de l'identité et de la différence: les syncrétismes culturo-religieux dans le contexte de la mondialisation. *Social Compass* 2005; 52; 417.
- Droogers, A. (2005) Syncretism and Fundamentalism: A Comparison. *Social Compass*, 52:463.
- Parker Gumucio, C. (2008). Interculturality, Conflicts and Religion: Theoretical Perspectives. *Social Compass*: 55; 316.

## **Media narratives of the interactions between religions and cultures in Canada**

Richelle Wiseman  
Centre for Faith and the Media

**Abstract:** Canadian immigration patterns suggest that as the country retains its commitment to intake some half a million immigrants a year from Southeast Asia, Africa, South and Central America, the dynamics of religious diversity and interactions in Canada are bound to increase. A fixed and rigid "secularist" mindset among news outlets, magazine boardrooms, film companies, and other media, will miss the richness of the creativity, diversity, imagination, and interactions between cultures and religions which will continue to form the "street narratives" which the media's meta-narrative overlooks. My presentation will document instances of where the "meta-narrative" is seen to prevail and distort the accurate portrayal of religion and culture in Canada, where it has missed the interactions between religions, and the contributions which culture and religion are making to each other.

**Key words:** *Media, religion, multiculturalism, Canada*

**Résumé :** Les patterns d'immigration canadienne suggèrent qu'étant donné que le pays conserve son engagement en faveur de l'admission d'un demi-million d'immigrants par an provenant de l'Asie du Sud-est, de l'Afrique, de l'Amérique du sud et centrale, la dynamique de la diversité religieuse et les interactions (entre différents groupes) au Canada vont augmenter. Une mentalité « séculaire » fixe et rigide existe parmi ceux et celles qui gèrent les salles de nouvelles, les comités éditoriaux des magazines, les sociétés de production cinématographique et autres médias. Cela se traduit dans un manque de richesse dans la créativité, la diversité, l'imagination et les interactions entre les cultures et religions, facteurs qui contribuent à façonner les vécus des gens dont les médias ne tiennent pas compte. Ma communication documentera certains cas où le récit médiatique l'emporte et fausse la représentation précise de la religion et de la culture au Canada, où les interactions entre les religions sont ignorées, et les contributions de la culture et de la religion ne sont pas présentes dans la sphère publique.

**Mots clés :** *Médias, religion, multiculturalisme, Canada*

You are a journalist, aboard a deep sea diving vessel with a camera, hoping to do a story on the enormous diversity of underwater sea life. Your camera is capable of viewing a swath about 20 metres across and 100 metres ahead. The deeper you go, the harder it is to see as sunlight diminishes. Imagine you spend several days photographing a few square kilometers and then you resurface. You are impressed with what you know. You have no idea how much you did not see, how much you do not know. But guess what....time to move onto the next project....to photograph caribou running across the tundra in the NWT. So that's it for your knowledge of the sea....all you have to go on is the footage you took, in one tiny spot, in a three day period. And this is your stock footage which you will use and re-use many times.

To use this as an illustration of how the media regards religion would be an exaggeration...but it helps to make the point. What do the media use to reference, to grasp, to understand, to report on religious enterprise and impulse in Canada? For over twenty years, I have been a communications person with direct experience and exposure to the wide spectrum of Canadian faith communities. Ever since helping to start VISION TV: Canada's Faith Network, in 1988 right up to the present and my work with the Centre for Faith and the Media, I have been confronted with the relationship between the media and religion, it seems to me quite a bit like the three days of footage of a tiny speck of the ocean.

"The media", broadly defined as news media, film, television, magazine, and online sources, present issues and stories about religion and its interaction with culture in Canada. Jeff Sharlet, who is editor of *The Revealer*, New York University's online review of religion and the press, suggests, "Religion in the true, broad sense underlies, controls, permeates at least half the stories in the news, probably a lot more."<sup>1</sup>

The Centre for Faith and the Media was founded in 2003 with a grant from Canadian Heritage, Multiculturalism, to help improve religion reporting in Canada. Up until then, the Ministry had viewed cultural diversity in Canada as ethnic, racial, and linguistic, and had almost completely ignored the issue of Canada's growing religious diversity. Then 9/11 changed that. Suddenly politicians and journalists realized that religion was an important force in society, and it could no longer be ignored. However, while religion cannot be ignored entirely, it most certainly can be marginalized, distorted, and caricatured.

## **The Secularist Metanarrative Prevails**

Of fundamental importance is dominance of secularist thinking and secularism as these provide the over-arching meta-narrative for the media and its approach to religious subjects, individuals, and issues. Secularists tend to regard religion and religious issues with a particular worldview, and one which shapes the portrayals of religion across the “mainstream” media. They see religion as a private matter without a place in the public sphere. The “secularist” mindset dominates the newsrooms of Canada where it is largely assumed that in pursuing journalistic “objectivity, one must be secular and therefore not have a particular or personal religious bias. By Bouchard and Taylor’s definition in their report to the Quebec government, the type of secularism in the newsroom is closed secularism, whereas their report advocates that Canada should move towards a more open secularism.

There are two major problems with the secularist metanarrative adopted by the media in Canada. The first problem is that the secularism theory itself has been shown to be false. Peter L. Berger, an eminent American sociologist who bought into the secularization theory of the world in the 1960s, did a complete about face and wrote the following in 1999, “The world today, with some exceptions . . . is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that a whole body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labeled ‘secularization theory’ is essentially mistaken.”<sup>2</sup> As most religion scholars and sociologists know, globally, religious adherence is on the increase, particularly in the growth of followers of Islam, which now numbers 1.5 billion, and evangelical Christians who have had astonishing growth in South America.

The second major problem with the secularist metanarrative is that secularism is in and of itself a religious worldview, and not a “religion-neutral” framework. It is laden with assumptions and values just as any other religious position, yet it has become the dominant narrative within the Canadian context. While Canada is regarded as a secular and pluralist democracy, the statistical evidence shows that the vast majority of Canadians identify themselves with a major religious tradition. For example, the Statistics Canada 2001 Census data suggests that 74% of Canadians identify themselves as Christian, across the range of Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant traditions and denominations.



As Statistics Canada only asks the religious identification every decade, the next time solid data will be available is following the 2011 census, when once again Canadians will be asked to identify their religious preferences. Smaller polls done by a range of organizations would suggest that while affiliation with mainline Christian denominations is declining in Canada, along with attendance at places of worship, the majority of Canadians will still consider themselves to be religious. It is expected the next census will reveal a dramatic growth in the numbers of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs in Canada. The other area of growth is among evangelical Christians. We can also expect to see growth in those who identify themselves as atheists, and also as “nones” with no religious affiliation whatsoever.

However, if you were to survey Canada’s news media, Canadian-produced films, Canadian mainstream magazines, and online mainstream news websites, you would be struck by the fact that Canada’s religious diversity and level of commitment is not accurately reflected. The operating meta-narrative which prevails is that Canada is a secular country, that religion is a private matter, that religion is on the decline, and that the religious beliefs of public figures are not worth taking seriously.

Unfortunately, this has a variety of negative impacts. Interactions between religious groups in Canada are rarely reflected, yet these interactions represent a hopeful sign of growing social cohesion, and the widely celebrated value of Canadian “tolerance”. Positive contributions to Canadian society from religious institutions and individuals are rarely considered news. The cultural value of religious expression across the arts is growing, yet it is often missed or misrepresented through the lens of secularism.

Canadian immigration patterns suggest that as Canada retains its commitment to intake some half a million immigrants a year from Southeast Asia, Africa, South and Central America, the dynamics of religious diversity and interactions in Canada are bound to increase. A fixed and rigid “secularist” mindset among news outlets, magazine boardrooms, film companies, and other media, will miss the richness of the creativity, diversity, imagination, and interactions between cultures and religions which will continue to form the “street narratives” which the media’s meta-narrative overlooks.

Just what are some instances of where the “meta-narrative” is seen to prevail and distort the accurate portrayal of religion and culture in Canada and the US? And where has it missed the interactions between religions, and the contributions which culture and religion are making to each other?

Two recent books have documented a host of specific instances of when and how the media have misrepresented news stories by ignoring or distorting the religious elements, or by stereotyping religious groups.

Blind Spot: When Journalists Don’t Get Religion, was published this year by Oxford University Press as part of the Oxford Centre for Religion and Public Life’s Media Project. Editors Paul Marshall, Lela Gilbert and Roberta Green Ahmanson obtained chapters from a diverse array of political scientists, professors of religion, policy experts, research scholars, writers, and think tank fellows. Together, these contributors argue that while theology need not shape journalists’ work, knowing the nuances of religion will lead to better reporting and will better serve the public.

In today’s world, a broad understanding of religious beliefs can no longer remain the bailiwick of “religion” editors alone, but must inform the work of all who gather and report the news. They discuss how 2004 U.S. presidential elections, conflicts with Iran, the wars in Iraq, and the papal succession were all major national and international stories where lack of understanding of the religious dynamics led to skewed reporting.

Through a Lens Darkly: How the News Media Perceive and Portray Evangelicals was also published this year by Clements Academic Press. The author, Dr. David M. Haskell, is the Chair of the Journalism Program at Wilfred Laurier University. Haskell’s book is based on several years of research and analysis of the Canadian news media’s coverage of evangelicals. It demonstrates clear examples of bias in the media towards conservative evangelicals and portrayals which, if applied to people of other faiths, would trigger major outcries and strong reactions.

Haskell examines in detail the coverage of Stockwell Day during his campaign with the Canadian Alliance, and campaign coverage of Stephen Harper prior to his election as prime

minister. Both men are evangelical Christians. Both received treatment by the media in Canada which would be unthinkable for individuals in other faith communities. On the cover of July 10, 2000 Macleans Magazine under a large photo of Stockwell Day, the caption read, “How scary?” The article was titled, “The Scare Factor.”

Can you imagine how B’Nai Brith would have responded if a Jewish political candidate was called “scary” on the cover of Macleans? Or how the Muslim community would have responded if a Muslim candidate was called “scary”? Yet evangelicals are fair game.

There was also much media speculation about the hidden agenda of Harper based on making connections between his evangelical faith, and the political positions taken by key evangelical figures in politics in the US. Again, not recognizing that American evangelicals are quite a different group, journalists stereotyped Canadian evangelicals in these news reports. The Globe and Mail front page headline for an article in spring 2005 read, “Christian activists capturing Tory races: Some in party worry new riding nominees will reinforce notion of ‘hidden agenda.’” The article used terminology like “hardline religious right” and “single issue people” and “religious zealots” to caricature a number of conservative Christians running for office. Ironically, it was the media which was reinforcing the hidden agenda theme.

Older books have examined the media’s treatment of religion as well. In 1998, Dr. Michael Higgins, President of St. Thomas University in Fredericton, delivered the Elizabeth Seton Lectures at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax. These lectures were compiled into a book titled, *The Muted Voice: Religion and the Media*, published by Novalis in 2000. Higgins lays out how the media is guilty of giving a platform to the most extreme forms of religion while ignoring the moderate and centrist expressions of faith. It is the shrill and strident voices who get the microphones and the ink when it comes to people of faith being represented in the media.

His points were clearly illustrated when the legislation for gay marriage was being debated in Canada. The CBC had a television newscast in which a gay marriage was being performed, and a pro-gay marriage person and an opponent of gay marriage were debating the ceremony which was going on in the background. This was classic...set up two polar extremes and heighten the conflict. In the name of journalistic balance, the goal was to allow both sides of the issue to have

their say. The problem with this approach is that across the religious and political spectrum on that story, there were many nuanced points of view. But the media has adopted this right/left two-sided bifurcated frame to many religious stories, and it is completely inadequate at conveying the range of views.

Dr. Karim Karim, former Director of the School of Journalism at Carleton University, wrote a book titled Islamic Peril: Media and Global Violence (Black Rose Books, 2000). The book has been critically acclaimed in international journals and it won the inaugural Robinson Book Prize of the Canadian Communication Association in 2001. Karim examines the way in which a different metanarrative, that of Western enlightenment, dictates how Islam is referenced in media throughout the Western world. His book lists in detail specific international news stories where the media's lack of understanding of Islam, including the difference between Shia and Sunni Muslims, and the difference between political and religious points of view in Islam, has led to an ongoing distortion of reality when it comes to Muslim stories.

In my own observation of stories pertaining to Muslims in Canada, there seem to be two approaches. One is a decidedly Islamophobic approach which tends to highlight and dwell on stories which reference militant and terrorist activities perpetrated by individuals calling themselves Muslims, and to portray only Muslims who fall into this category. The other approach is equally faulty. When the Toronto 18 were arrested in June 2006, the almost day-long press conference held by Toronto Police, Mississauga and Brampton police, the RCMP, the Mayor's office, and representatives of the Muslim communities in the GTA, bent over backwards to never use the word Muslim in referring to the individuals who had been arrested. As Christie Blatchford stated a few days later on the cover of the *Globe and Mail*, Islam was the elephant in the room. The unwillingness to mention the fact that all 18 men were practicing Muslims, with connections to mosques, demonstrated an unprofessional deference. Between these two extremes – Islamophobia and unprofessional deference – there is such a thing as balanced, accurate, fair, non-stereotyping, and honest reporting.

It is just that in relation to the Muslim community, and other communities – Catholics and evangelical Christians in particular, it is the negative stories which garner the most media attention and the media are often guilty of failing to research stories, neglecting to provide

context and nuance, and perpetuating stereotypes as a result. What is very interesting is the fact that slowly, eminent journalists are waking up to their own blind spot about religion.

Kevin Newman, national news anchor for Global Television, made a documentary last year called “Hip 2B Holy” in which he and the producer examined the growing evangelical movement among urban youth in Canada’s major cities. He confesses in an interview about the program that he had not realized there was such religious activity among youth, and he had been blind to the changes in Canada’s religious landscapes<sup>3</sup>.

Other major journalists have identified this problem as well. The late Peter Jennings, in a 1995 address to the Harvard Divinity School remarked:

“I have only recently come to understand how complicated and inadequate, and occasionally horrifying, media coverage of religion has been. I would venture to say that in the overwhelming majority of newsrooms in America there is an appalling ignorance of religion and faith.”

Jennings in fact used to say that some of his ABC colleagues thought he was “positively pedantic” about finding the religion angle in any news story. But he was unapologetic: “Every other human endeavor is the subject of continuing coverage by us—politics and cooking, business and foreign policy, sports and sex and entertainment. But religion, which we know from every reasonable yardstick to be a crucial force in the daily life of the world, has so few specialists that they are hardly visible on the page or on the screen.”

CNN political analyst William Schnieder said, “On the national level, the press is one of the most secular institutions in American society. It just doesn’t get religion or any idea that flows from religious conviction. The press is not necessarily contemptuous of serious religion. It’s just uncomprehending.”<sup>4</sup>

Writing about his “aha” moment from the 2004 US election, Roy Peter Clark, a senior scholar at the Poynter Institute on media studies made this revealing confession after Bush won for a second term.

“I am now taking seriously the theory that we mainstream journalists are different from mainstream America. ‘Different’ is too pale a word. We are alienated...the churched people who embrace Bush, in spite of a bumbling war and a stumbling economy, are more than alien to me. They are invisible...

I don’t know the difference between evangelical and charismatic, but I can argue about who has sluttier videos, Britney or Christina. I know little about the ‘born again’ experience, but I can celebrate the narrative structure of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*.

I’ve never listened to a religious radio program or attended a church supper, but I can tell you whatever you want to know about Howard Stern and Bubba the Love Sponge. I attend Catholic mass most Sundays, but in my life as a citizen, I am a thorough secularist...My blind spots blot out half of America. And that makes me less of a citizen and less of a journalist.”<sup>5</sup>

If the world is more furiously religious than ever, shouldn’t journalists and media outlets bone up on religion and take it very seriously? Just as reporters are sent off to take a Canadian Securities course in order to cover finance....should not some of them be given professional training in understanding the explosion of religious fervor happening around the world and also right under their noses?

### **Underneath the Umbrella of the Secularist Metanarrative**

Kirk LaPointe, Managing Editor of the Vancouver Sun once said, “Thousands of airplanes take off and land every day. We only cover the ones that crash.”

Operating underneath the umbrella of the secularist metanarrative is the framing of news stories around three themes: Controversy, Conflict, and Crisis. These are the three C’s of news reporting throughout North America. In both books, *Blind Spot*, and *Through a Lens Darkly*, the authors have done research to assess the number of stories in a time period which pertain to religion, which religious community the stories are about and compared that proportionately with the size of that religious community, and then analyzed the nature of those stories. The results in general suggest that Catholics receive a lot of news coverage, most of it related to controversy,

conflict and crisis, that Protestant Christianity in general is under-reported, relative to the size of Protestantism in Canada. Evangelicals who comprise 12% of the Canadian population receive even less coverage, almost all of it negative; the Muslim community, which comprises about 1% of the populace, receives a disproportionately large amount of news coverage, and it is almost exclusively negative.

If the secularist metanarrative blocks out an appropriate view of the significance of religious life in Canada, then the three C's manage to distort what is left. Imagine all the religious planes that take off and land every day. The only ones that get covered are the crashes....the priests and pastors caught in sexual scandals, the Muslim extremists who engage in acts of terror, the faith healers who turn out to be charlatans and frauds.

Meanwhile, the fuller expression of religious life in Canada revolves around three very different C's. Celebration, Cooperation, and Constructive Dialogue.

If your mantra in the newsroom is: CONFLICT, CONTROVERSY, CRISIS, then why would you be interested in reflecting CELEBRATION, COOPERATION or CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE between faith groups? Who would be interested? Who would read or watch? Who cares?

So the media metanarrative of 3 C's runs counter to the religious narratives of celebration, cooperation, and constructive dialogue. Here is how the media's 3 C's line up against religion's 3 C's:

CONFLICT vs COOPERATION

CONTROVERSY vs CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE

CRISIS vs CELEBRATION

During the first Gulf War, Canadian journalist Arthur Kent vaulted to fame as he covered what was occurring in Iraq, and earned the name the "Scud Stud." He has covered news stories around the world, many of them with a religious angle, in the Middle East, in Afghanistan, the

Tiananmen Square massacre, and the Bosnian war. At the Centre for Faith and the Media national conference in 2005, Arthur Kent said,

“Too much of our reporting on faith and spirituality is refracted through prisms of controversy and conflict. We need to look beyond the glib pronouncements of extremists, at home and abroad, as they manipulate religion for political purposes. The true quest of any genuine faith is peace, so any thoughtful coverage and analysis of those who speak in the name of religion should begin with the question: "What have you done lately for peace?"

If the media actually asked that question of religious leaders, they would be surprised to hear all the efforts religious groups are making to promote peace.

In May 2004, the Montreal Gazette reported on the results of an Environics survey for the Association for Canadian Studies. The results showed that Canadians now expect religion to be the greatest source of social conflict in Canada in the coming years. For Canadians, tensions between different faiths are now a greater source of concern than the language issues, aboriginal issues, or regional disparities. And no wonder. If the only religion stories the media focus on are conflict-based, then how would the public know that there is so much more positive activity going on?

### **Interfaith Dialogue**

If the media miss the stories about individual communities of faith, they are indeed almost completely unaware of how faith communities are interacting with each other. And interfaith dialogue? It just doesn't translate well into news. At the average interfaith dialogue event, there is a panel at the front of the room with a priest, a rabbi, and an imam....does this sound like the beginning of a joke? And they are bending over backwards to be nice to each other and agree with each other and they seem wonderfully chummy. How is this news?

If they got up off their chairs, went out into the community and were seen side by side doing something together....well now maybe a TV camera could pick that up, and it might be news. If



they jointly founded an organization together that made real change in the lives of people by promoting peace, social justice and community health? Now we have a news story.

In the book *Blind Spot*, the authors record the astonishing story of interfaith cooperation and advocacy at the international level which has been largely overlooked by the media. In the chapter titled, “The Faith-based Human Rights Quest”, contributor Allen Hertzke describes how he has followed closely the emergence of US landmark congressional initiatives in the area of international human rights legislation, largely initiated through advocacy by faith leaders in the US. But the media has missed or distorted the story.

Faith communities have come together in rare combinations to address the issues of child trafficking, human trafficking, religious persecution, human rights abuses in Sudan, China, North Korea, and this has resulted in the passage into US law the following Acts: The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, The Trafficking Victims Protection Act in 2000, The Sudan Peace Act of 2002, and the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004. These Acts have had an enormous effect on US foreign policy and on the pursuit of human rights at the government level in other countries.

The reason the stories have gone underreported, according to Hertzke, is this: conservative Christians, normally labeled as “The Religious Right”, in the United States, were on board along with the Catholics, mainline Protestants, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, in pushing for these Acts. For some reason, if conservative Christians are signatories on documents decrying human trafficking, torture, or other human rights issues, then the actions of the rest of the religious groups are suddenly dismissed.

He followed the news reports in the New York Times, The Washington Post, and other major outlets before and after the passage of these Acts into law, and this is what he found.

On the religious freedom bill, the Times defined the issue as a cause célèbre of the “Christian Right”, and even when the legislation was endorsed by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, and the Campaign for Tibet, the Times failed to report this. According to Hertzke, “the Times’s preoccupation with the “Christian Right”

seriously deprecated the vigorous efforts of Catholics, Jews, Episcopalians, Baha'is, Tibetan Buddhists, and others on behalf of the religious-freedom cause.’’<sup>6</sup>

His research on how the stories of Sudan and Darfur have been covered is startling. The caricatures and even inventions of stories regarding the activities of religious groups in Sudan and even the basis of the conflicts themselves, have demonstrated overtly biased reporting on a variety of instances. Actual fabricated reports made it all the way to 60 Minutes, and other major news programs, which were later proven to have misrepresented the activities of religious organizations seeking to aid the victims of the conflicts and victims of slavery. If you are interested in the Sudan story at all, you must read this chapter in *Blind Spot*.

These examples represent a travesty of news reporting. They demonstrate again that even inter-religious and interfaith efforts of an international scope and significance can be dismissed, distorted, ignored, or even falsified by mainstream media, for reasons of bias.

In Alberta this past summer, a diverse group of religious leaders hopped on a plane together to fly over the tarsands, and came back to make a statement to the media about the immorality of the tarsands development. This was big news in oil-friendly Alberta. Mostly people were offended that religious leaders thought they had anything at all to say about the oilsands. Shouldn't they stick to talking about faith matters only?

This was precisely why the story was big news. It was news because faith leaders took religious values out of their sanctuaries and into the public square. How dare they? This is Canada where religion has no business in the public square of the nation. Nor does it have any business in the bedrooms of the nation apparently, or the courtrooms, or the schools, or the legislative assemblies, or the hospitals, or the pharmacies.

This is where the news stories are arising, out of the conflict between religious communities and their values and the wider supposedly secular public square. Hijabs, burkas, Sikh kirpans, prayer rooms, Hutterite drivers licences, honour killings, euthanasia and assisted suicide, references in scriptures to homosexuality, the teaching of religion in public schools, religious holidays and public displays - these are the news stories of the day because they are conflict-based narratives.

Religious people are in conflict with Canadian society. This is now a stock story-line in the grander secularist metanarrative that the media upholds every day.

I would like to turn the 3'Cs paradigm on its head. If news is what is new.....then surely after thousands of years of religious conflict and turmoil, cooperation among faiths is new and therefore news. If a peace agreement was reached tomorrow between Israeli's and Palestinians, this would be major news. When the troubles in Ireland came to an end, it was big news. When apartheid came tumbling down, it was big news. Surely when major walls, major oppressive regimes, major political deadlocks are broken down...this is news.

In 2003, CBC Edmonton covered a story after the second Iraq war about the Muslim community in the city launching a project to assist a small town in southern Iraq. The town had been bombed into oblivion during the first Gulf War, was in a rebuilding phase when it was once again almost completely destroyed in the second conflict. The Edmonton Council of Muslim Communities decided to adopt the town, and send people, medicine, building materials, clothing and whatever supplies they could muster to assist this ravaged place. The Quakers in Edmonton heard about the project, phone up the Edmonton Council of Muslims and said, "Can we join you in adopting the village? We want to help too." The story made it to CBC's "The National." Why? Because it was news and therefore news. It was new to hear of a Christian group offering to help a Muslim group to rebuild a Muslim town. Such interfaith cooperation struck a cord with the journalist, and with the producers, and it received national news status.

This one story and its success gives me a measure of hope, that as interfaith cooperation increases globally, nationally, and locally, there will be journalists in the media who see the news value, and who will also see it as their social responsibility to inform the public that religion is not always about conflict, controversy, and crisis. The cooperation of religious communities will in and of itself be deemed new and therefore news, so there might be a possibility that interfaith cooperation will find itself controversial because it defies expectations, and then begin to receive more news coverage.

I am on the Communications Team for the Interfaith Religious Leaders' G8 Summit in Canada which will parallel the political leaders' G8 Summit being hosted next July in Ontario. This

event will be an opportunity for religious leaders, in an interfaith context, to speak about the moral obligations of governments to pursue justice for the poor and responsible action towards the earth. We hope the Canadian media will recognize the positive role religious communities in Canada are playing already in contributing to the solutions of these issues.

### **The Perfect Storm**

Here again is the perfect storm for religion in the media – three major forces which have converged simultaneously:

The Secularist Metanarrative Umbrella

The 3 C's of Framing News Stories: Controversy, Conflict and Crisis

And finally, the other 3 C's of the Media:

- Corporate Concentration of media empires – ownership of more than one media and shared content
- Convergence of technologies
- Commodification of the news – turning it into INFOTAINMENT

The consequence of these three C's has been the homogenization of the news, limited voices and viewpoints as there are fewer journalists creating copy, and one dominant editorial policy over entire empires of radio, television, newsprint, magazine, and internet. In addition, news is now a product, focused on entertaining rather than on informing the public. All of these have seriously limited religion reporting.

Ironically while Canada celebrates “multiculturalism”, the media have been busily coalescing into a mono-culture, thanks to these three C's.

The good news is that the perfect storm is petering out. The status quo for the media is crumbling, and so are the empires, thanks in part to the recession and to the new media – the internet, social networking, Twitter, and Facebook. There are multiple voices exploding into blogs and citizen journalism.

In 1992, long before Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace, Leonard Cohen wrote a prophetic line in his song, “The Future”. “There’ll be the breaking of the ancient western code. Your private life will suddenly explode.”

He perhaps didn’t realize he was speaking of the new social media revolution. According to Barefoot Generation, a study of teens and their internet and media usage conducted for the Canadian Mennonites, “Twitter is the new star in the social media space. From the overwhelming success of MySpace, who was lapsed by Facebook in May of 2008 (MySpace had 114 million unique visitors that months and Facebook had 123.9 million unique visitors). From January 2009 to March 2009 the number of visits to Twitter went from 9.8 million to 19.1 million and the experts anticipate that it will hit 50 million by summer.”<sup>7</sup>

### **What Does This Mean for Religion?**

It might mean that the old 3 C’s template will be set aside as new media, and younger people, look for substance in their media content, and demand truthful representations of community life, including religious communities.

In fact, there is an interesting parallelism going on with the simultaneous demise of institutionalized corporate media and a decline in adherence to institutional religion while at the same time there is an increase in social media, citizen journalism, and experiential spirituality outside of institutional religion.

There is an old saying that religious organizations are about twenty years behind the wider culture. Unfortunately, that has been true in my observations over the past thirty years. And here we are now having crossed the threshold into the new Gutenberg Revolution.... Only this one is the GOOGLE/INTERNET Revolution....and where are religious organizations? Playing catch up as usual.

I sat in a room of a dozen religious communicators in Edmonton a few weeks ago, and I commented that everyone in the room was over fifty, white, and mostly male. No wonder we’re

playing catch up. I told them that religious organizations need to bring along side and hand over some power to the 25 year olds who swim in the waters of blogs, Facebook, DIGG, MySpace, Twitter, because they are fluent in those languages and mediums, they need to be the ones to translate the activities, values and contributions of religious communities into the wider sphere.

Religion need not be “lost in translation”. While it might be distorted or ignored altogether by the lenses of secular mainstream media, it can be brought into sharp focus in the hands of young people who speak “Internet” in all of its new and rapidly evolving dialects. It will be spiritually-aware young journalists, who have wriggled out of the boomer secularist box, and young religious communicators who will investigate the bounty of the religious ocean, and who won’t be satisfied in reducing it to a 30-second clip. The new media, as they challenge the fundamental paradigms of traditional media, just might offer new windows on religion and spiritual news stories.

If we are becoming much more highly connected now through the internet, then there must be unexplored opportunities to connect people to each other, across faith and religious boundaries, across secularist borders, and beyond the paralyzing stereotypes that the public have been given about religion, and those that religious people have about each other. As Leonard Cohen sings in his song, “Anthem”, “Ring the bells that still can ring, forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.” As the media egg cracks, perhaps that is how the light of religious communities and interfaith activity will get in.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Jeff Sharlot, “Killing Religion Journalism”, The Revealer, October 7, 2004, as quoted in Blind Spot: When Journalists Don’t Get Religion, Introduction.

<sup>2</sup> Berger, p.2

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-o1Uoa6l8x4&feature=player\\_embedded#](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-o1Uoa6l8x4&feature=player_embedded#)

<sup>4</sup> Blind Spot, p.4.

<sup>5</sup> Blind Spot, p.5.

<sup>6</sup> Blind Spot, p.70.

<sup>7</sup> Barefoot Generation, A Research Document Compiled by Barefoot Creative (In partnership with Canadian Mennonite University, the Barefoot Conference and Mike Tennant.) p.1.

## References

Berger, P.L. (Editor) (1999) *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Cohen,L. (1992) “Anthem” from the album “THE FUTURE”, Sony Entertainment.

Haskell, D. (2009) *Through a Lens Darkly: How the News Media Perceive and Portray Evangelicals*. Toronto: Clements Publishing.

Higgins, M. (2000) *The Muted Voice: Religion and the Media*. Ottawa: Novalis

Karim K. (2000) *Islamic Peril: Media and Global Violence*. Montreal: Black Rose Books.

Marshall, P. L. Gilbert & R. Green Ahmanson (Editors) (2008) *BLIND SPOT: When Journalists Don’t Get Religion*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Neuhaus, R.J. (1984) *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans.

Silk, M. (1995). *Unsecular Media; Making News of Religion in America*, Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Tennant, M. (ND) *Barefoot Generation, A Research Document*. Compiled by Barefoot Creative (In partnership with Canadian Mennonite University, the Barefoot Conference and Mike Tennant.)

## **Community of belief vs. community in creation: A challenge for religion communicators**

Douglas F. Cannon,  
Religion Communicators Council

**Abstract:** Religion communicators in the United States face a conceptual challenge. Is their mission to sell a product, shape public opinion, package and distribute information, or manage interactions with social groups? These approaches assume fundamentally different understandings of relationality. Do faith groups think that community is based on shared belief or creation? Which choice fosters relationships that encourage cooperation and discourage polarization? The answers guide how faith groups value dialogue, respond to disagreements and understand public relations. This presentation uses a hermeneutical approach and results from surveys of U.S. religion communicators and faith group leaders to suggest answers. The discussion is to consider how religion communicators and faith group leaders understand public relations, how communicators approach their work and how they rate their skills for dealing with conflicts.

**Key words:** *Public relations, religious communicators, interfaith dialogue*

**Résumé :** Les professionnels de la communication dans le domaine religieux aux États-Unis relèvent un défi conceptuel. Est-ce leur mission de vendre un produit, former l'opinion publique, divulguer des informations ou gérer les interactions entre les groupes sociaux? Ces approches supposent fondamentalement différentes interprétations de la fonction de relation publique. Est-ce que les groupes religieux sont de l'idée que la communauté repose sur la conviction partagée ou sur la création? Quel choix favorisent les relations qui encouragent la coopération et découragent la polarisation? Les réponses éclairent comment les groupes religieux jugent le dialogue, répliquent aux désaccords et comprennent les relations publiques. Cette présentation suit une approche herméneutique et discute les résultats des enquêtes américaines auprès de « communicateurs religieux » et chefs religieux afin de suggérer des réponses à ces questions. Il s'agit donc d'examiner comment les professionnels de la communication dans le domaine religieux et les leaders comprennent les relations publiques, et finalement, comment ils conçoivent leur travail et comment ils évaluent leurs compétences pour traiter les situations conflictuelles.

**Mots clés :** *Relations publiques, communicateurs religieux, dialogue interreligieux*



The *Faith & Values Newsletter* from Duke Divinity School in North Carolina ran a lead item September 1, 2009, on church infighting. Headlined “Hope in conflict,” the article reported on how Christian denominational leaders could transform conflict-ridden social systems into reconciled communities of believers. The story noted that internal fights had been common within the Christian movement since New Testament days. The solution was corporate discernment of God’s will, authentic dialogue between individuals about core issues, a choice to heal and an understanding of ultimate relationship through God.

This *Faith & Values* article alludes to two distinct concepts of relationality—or how we are connected to one another. One is based on community consensus. The other is based on the family of God. Recognizing the difference is important to public relations. This paper suggests that religion communicators can be most effective in fostering relationships, encouraging cooperation, dealing with conflicts and responding to disagreements when they understand that consensus is *not* the foundation of strong communities. Strong relationships come from seeing all people as members of God’s family. My research indicates that religion communicators in the United States are more concerned with consensus than stronger family connections. That may limit their effectiveness in various interreligious and intercultural dialogues.

This paper is based on research among members of the Religion Communication Council. That’s the oldest public relations professional organization in the United States. The council was founded in 1929 as the Religious Publicity Council. Today it has more than 500 members across the United States. Those members work in public relations, advertising, news and other communication activities. They represent Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Baha’i and Hare Krishna organizations. The council focuses on bringing faith perspective to public discourse. Additional missions include building an understanding and acceptance of diverse faith groups among council members and promoting understanding and acceptance of religious faith and faith communities in American society.

Throughout the council’s 80-year history, members have debated exactly how they should approach their work. Are religion communicators to promote programs, package and distribute information, sell a product, shape public opinion, or manage interactions with social groups?

Some members, such as Ralph Stoody (1959), known in the 1950s as the dean of religious public relations (Dugan, Nannes, & Stross, 1979), contended that religion communicators should see themselves more as in-house journalists and not the “hidden persuaders” vilified by Vance Packard (1957).

Questions about what communicators should do mirror a broader debate in the American business world about what public relations is and does. Tilson (2009) details many activities by public relations practitioners to foster intercultural dialogue and defuse community tensions. Nevertheless, many popular communication gurus, such as Breakenridge (2008), Breakenridge and DeLoughry (2003), Ries (2002), Solis and Breakenridge (2009) and Weiner (2006), equate public relations almost solely with publicity. They say the practice is part of a business’ marketing mix. The purpose is to promote product sales.

In the academic world, Hutton (1999) identified “managing strategic relationships” as the central organizing principle of modern public relations practice. Grunig (1992, 2006) echoed that idea in his work on Excellence Public Relations Theory. He described public relations as a strategic management function regulating interdependency between organizations and constituencies, not just a collection of technical operations such as messaging, publicity and media relations. He said public relations practice should foster quality, long-term relationships between an organization and its strategic constituencies. That’s in line with what Dietz (2009), Tilson (2009) and Williams (2009) are describing. But Broom, Casey and Ritchey (1997) noted that public relations literature seldom defined “relationships” or described how to measure them. A survey of public relations textbooks and academic journals found “relationship” was used as a primitive term. The same was true in literature from interpersonal communication, psychotherapy and interorganizational relationships.

Clark and Mills (1993) identified “exchange” and “communal” relationships using social science deductive techniques. Slife (2004) used a hermeneutical approach to identify weak and strong relationality. Slife’s approach appears to fit religion public relations a bit better than Clark and Miller’s. This paper calls the weak version a “community of belief” and the strong version a “community in creation.”

A community of belief is made up of autonomous individuals thought to share generally common abstract opinions, values or concepts (political views, religious beliefs, professional ethics, social prejudices, economic philosophies, etc.). The biggest threat to a community of belief is disunity (disagreement or conflict over the commonly shared beliefs or values). As a result, community members often avoid topics of potential conflict (leading to the old admonition, “Never discuss religion or politics”). Persuasion and ostracism are primary defenses against disunity. Those with the majority viewpoint work hard to show people with other opinions the right way to think or silence their dissenting voices. If disagreement becomes too threatening and the minority won’t assent to the dominant view, the majority is likely to ostracize the malcontents and, thus, eliminate dissent (Slife, 2004). Noelle-Neumann (1974) captured that dynamic in her spiral of silence theory of public opinion.

The community in creation can tolerate disunity. That’s because people are always connected by virtue of location, shared associations, common practices or relationship to God—not by virtue of common beliefs. Community members are individual and different. In fact, a strong relational community requires difference. An important task in communities based on creation is protecting “otherness.” That doesn’t mean that common beliefs are unimportant. It just means that beliefs are secondary to relationships. The main threat to a strong relational community—as illustrated by the *Faith & Values* example—is loss of meaningful dialogue. As a result, conflict is sought. Conflict brings ideas into competition and can enhance intellectual growth and learning. Community members don’t merely tolerate one another’s beliefs. People want to engage them. Proponents of different views may even try to persuade others concerning the merits of their perspective, but pressure for agreement isn’t a factor. That’s because disagreement doesn’t jeopardize the community foundation or lead to a breach in relationships (Slife, 2004).

Within public relations scholarship, we see evidence of the weak and strong understandings of community in four 25-year-old models of public relations practice (Grunig & Todd, 1984):

**Press agency/publicity model:** Promotional information is transmitted one way from an organization—primarily through mass media—to a generally undefined audience. Truth

and accuracy are not factors. No audience research is involved. These four statements are used to describe and measure public relation practices according to this model:

- The purpose of communication is, quite simply, to get publicity for this organization.
- In communication one mostly attempts to get favorable publicity into the media and to keep unfavorable publicity out.
- The success of a communication program can be determined from the number of people who attend an event or who use products or services.
- For this organization public relations and publicity mean essentially the same thing.

**Public information model:** Factual, newsworthy information is transmitted one way from an organization to news media outlets for dissemination to users of those outlets. News releases reflect journalistic news values. The journalistic norms of truth and accuracy are accepted. No audience research is involved. These four statements are used to describe and measure public relation practices according to this model:

- In communication, nearly everyone is so busy writing news stories or producing publications that there is no time to do research.
- In communication, accurate information should be disseminated, but unfavorable information should not be volunteered.
- Keeping a clipping file is about the only way to determine the success of communication.
- Communication is more a neutral disseminator of information than an advocate for the organization or a mediator between management and publics.

**Two-way asymmetrical model:** An organization uses intelligence from audience research to determine actions and craft messages designed to achieve specific goals. The focus is on persuading target groups to behave as the organization wants. Information collected on audiences is not used to modify the goals, policies or actions of the organization. Research simply guides message crafting. These four statements are used to describe and measure public relation practices according to this model:

- After completing a communication program, research should be done to determine how effective it has been in changing people's attitude.

- In communication the broad goal is to persuade publics to behave as the organization wants them to behave.
- Before starting a communication program, one should look at attitude surveys to make sure the organization and its policies are described in ways our publics would be most likely to accept.
- Before beginning a communication program, one should do research to determine public attitudes toward the organization and how they might be changed.

**Two-way symmetrical model:** An organization uses audience research to determine actions that will promote understanding and reduce conflicts with key publics. Information collected on audiences may influence what an organization does and says. These four statements are used to describe and measure public relation practices according to this model:

- The purpose of communication is to develop mutual understanding between the management of the organization and the public the organization affects.
- Before starting a communication program, survey or informal research should be done to find out how much management and our publics understand each other.
- The purpose of communication is to change attitudes and behaviors of management as much as it is to change the attitudes and behaviors of publics.
- Communication should provide mediation for the organization—to help management and publics negotiate conflicts.

The publicity and public information models reflect information transmission, not relationality. The asymmetrical model represents weak relationality. The goal of two-way communication is to persuade people to do what you want.

The two-way symmetrical model includes elements of both weak and Slife's strong relationality. Grunig, Grunig and Dozier (2002) says the symmetrical model draws on dialogical concepts from Bakhtin (1981). Other hermeneutical scholars cite him as well. The symmetrical model describes mutual influence between an organization and its publics. But the goal is still consensus, a sign of weak relationality. Individuals, organizations and publics use communication to adjust their ideas and behaviors to each other rather than try to control what

other people think. Publics are just as likely to influence an organization as an organization is to influence those publics. But at another level of analysis, the relationship could be seen in the ongoing give and take between the organization and publics. That would be closer to Slife's strong relationality.

In late 2006 and early 2007, I surveyed members of the Religion Communicators Council. Replicating questionnaire items developed by Grunig, Grunig and Dozier (2002), I asked religion communicators how well Grunig and Todd's four models matched their understanding of public relations. I also asked communicators how much they thought their faith group leaders would agree with these four public relations approaches. In early 2008 I asked the bosses the same question.

Table 1 shows the results. Religion communicators agreed most with the two-way symmetrical model and disagreed most with the public information model. But low reliability coefficients for three of the four models raised questions about the scales in my sample. Earlier surveys showed much higher reliability coefficients for the 16 statements describing the models (Grunig, 1992; Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). Therefore, I did a factor analysis. The goal was to see how religion communicators might group the 16 items differently from the original factoring reported by Grunig (1992)

Table 1  
*Mean agreement by RCC members with four models of public relations*

Model	Mean <sup>a</sup>	Alpha
Two-way symmetrical	3.62	.62
Two-way asymmetrical	3.49	.55
Press agency/publicity	2.71	.54
Public information	2.52	.24

Note: Responses were 1 "Strongly disagree," 2 "Disagree," 3 "Neither agree nor disagree," 4 "Agree," 5 "Strongly agree."

<sup>a</sup> n=116

The resulting factors did remix statements about the four approaches. Table 2 shows the results. The four factors included only 12 of Grunig's 16 original measures of public relations practice. Three statements about the public information model and one about the publicity model didn't load.

Table 2

*Factor loading for RCC member responses to measures of public relations models*

Measure	Factor loading				
	1	2	3	4	Com-munality
Before beginning a communication program, one should do research to determine public attitudes toward the organization and how they might be changed. <b>(2A)</b>	.85				.57
Before starting a communication program, survey or informal research should be done to find out how much management and our publics understand each other. <b>(2S)</b>	.80				.58
Before starting a communication program, one should look at attitude surveys to make sure the organization and its policies are described in ways our publics would be most likely to accept. <b>(2A)</b>	.58				.40
After completing a communication program, research should be done to determine how effective it has been in changing people's attitudes. <b>(2A)</b>	.43				.29
The purpose of communication is, quite simply, to get publicity for this organization. <b>(PA)</b>		.68			.34
In communication the broad goal is to persuade publics to behave as the organization wants them to behave. <b>(2A)</b>		.58			.37
For this organization public relations and publicity mean essentially the same thing. <b>(PA)</b>		.48			.24
The purpose of communication is to develop mutual understanding between the management of the organization and the publics the organization affects. <b>(2S)</b>			.62		.29
Communication should provide mediation for the organization—to help management and publics negotiate conflicts. <b>(2S)</b>			.60		.40
The purpose of communication is to change attitudes and behaviors of management as much as it is to change the attitudes and behaviors of publics. <b>(2S)</b>			.40		.26
In communication accurate information should be disseminated, but unfavorable information should not be volunteered. <b>(PI)</b>				.70	.41
In communication one mostly attempts to get favorable publicity into the media and to keep unfavorable publicity out. <b>(PA)</b>				.63	.47
Eigenvalues	2.15	1.37	1.26	1.15	
% of variance	13.43	8.59	7.85	7.18	

Note: Loadings &lt;.40 are omitted

PA=Press agentry/publicity, PI=Public information, 2A=Two-way asymmetrical, 2S=Two-way symmetrical

**Factor 1** mirrored the two-way asymmetrical models. It showed a strong emphasis on advance research as a basis for planning communication efforts and follow-up research as a basis for evaluating results—particularly attitude changes. This factor focused on how an

organization could learn about publics so it could successfully influence them.

**Factor 2** emphasized persuasion through publicity and seemed to match current popular understanding of public relations. Organizations used communication to seek publicity. Publicity was the purpose of public relations. The goal of public relations was to get publics to behave the way the organization wants.

**Factor 3** emphasized mutual influence and was very close to the two-way symmetrical model. The focus was on using communication to build two-way understanding, mediate conflicts between organizations and publics, and let publics influence the organization as much as it influences them.

**Factor 4** emphasized using media relations to get positive news coverage. The focus was on getting accurate, positive information about the organization into the news and avoiding bad publicity.

The four factors gave insights into how religion communicators understood public relations. Religion communicators didn't link statements the way secular practitioners had done in previous surveys. RCC members did recognize three mutual-influence statements from the two-way symmetrical model as one approach to public relations. But religion communicators appeared to put more emphasis on persuasion, publicity and good media relations than the models did. That emphasis reflected what Slife would call weak relationality—community based on belief.

The two-way symmetrical model included a statement about conflict resolution. It said: "Communication should provide mediation for the organization—to help management and publics negotiate conflicts." Religion communicators didn't show strong agreement with it. The 3.42 median response would be considered "neither agree nor disagree." Among faith group leaders who supervise communicators, the median response was 2.81—clearly leaning toward "disagree." That was the lowest median response among faith group leaders for any statement about the two-way symmetrical model. Those survey responses suggest that neither religion



communicators nor their bosses see a role for public relations in conflict resolution. If we expected to see more initiatives by religion communicators like the ones described in Tilson (2009), thinking in both groups needs to change.

The most unexpected finding from my surveys was that religion communicators didn't know how their supervisors understood public relations. When asked to predict how their leaders would respond to the 16 measures for the models, communicators overestimated support for the publicity and public information approaches and underestimated support for the two-way symmetrical and asymmetrical models. Communicators thought faith group leaders would consider attendance at events a primary indicator of public relations success, publicity the purpose of public relations and getting good news coverage the primary objective of communication work. Top executives generally disagreed with those ideas and were much more interested in researched-based efforts to establish relationships. That disconnect doesn't speak too well for religion communicators. Thirty-six percent of survey respondents said they were on their organization's senior management team. Two-thirds said they reported directly to their organization's chief executive. With that type of direct access, how could communicators not know what their bosses thought about public relations?

That question leads to another battery of survey questions I asked. They related to what religion communicators said they did for their organizations. Broom and Smith (1979) initially developed and tested four conceptual models of public relations roles in 1979. Those roles were:

**Expert prescriber:** The practitioner functions as an authority on both the public relations problem and solution. The practitioner researches and defines the problem, develops the solution and takes major responsibility for implementing the solution.

**Communication process facilitator:** The practitioner serves as a liaison, interpreter and mediator between the organization and its publics. The emphasis is on maintaining a continuous flow of two-way communication. The practitioner is a collaborator with both management and the various publics.

**Problem-solving facilitator:** As a member of the management team, the practitioner works with others throughout the organization to define and solve problems. The communicator helps guide other managers and the organization through a rational problem-solving process. That may involve all parts of the organization in public relations planning and programming.

**Communications technician:** Practitioners provide clients with a specialized skill to carry out public relations functions. Rather than being part of the management team, communicators prepare and produce materials—as writers, editors, audiovisual producers and media relations specialists—for public relations efforts. Technicians are not usually involved in organizational decision making. They explain decisions made by others.

Broom (1982), Broom and Dozier (1986), Dozier (1983, 1984, 1992), and Dozier and Broom (1995) further tested these models. They eventually identified two overarching roles: *public relations manager* and *technician*. The manager category included the various subcategories that Broom and Smith (1979) had named.

Broom (1982) developed seven statements to measure each of his four roles. I used those statements in my surveys. My results again showed a disconnect between what religion communicators said they did and what their supervisors said they expected. Communicators described themselves as technicians. They spent most of their days writing, editing and maintaining media contacts. Top executives said they wanted their communicators to be managers. Specifically, leaders were looking for expert prescribers and problem-solving facilitators. Such communicators would diagnose communication problems, point out needs for systematic communication planning, plan and recommend courses of action, outline alternative approaches, keep management involved in communications decisions, make communication policy decisions, and take responsibility for the success or failure of the communication effort. Communicators considered all those tasks less important than their supervisors did. Top executives did not expect communicators to spend much time taking pictures or editing materials written by others for grammar and spelling. But that's what communicators said they did. But, interestingly for 2006-2007, these communication technicians weren't using new Web 2.0 media such as blogs or

podcasts.

Work environment might have influenced responses from religion communicators. A quarter said they were the only communication person in their organization. Another third represented departments with fewer than five people. Someone had to produce the communication products, take questions from reporters and prepare responses. Those technical duties would likely leave little time for more managerial functions. Grunig, Grunig and Dozier (2002) reported a similar situation among the 64 nonprofit organizations in their Excellence studies. Communication staffs in those nonprofits were small—often just one person. As a result, communicators filled both manager and technician roles. Nevertheless, communicators in nonprofits were usually more involved in strategic planning than their corporate counterparts. Religion communicators said they were only sometimes involved in strategic planning.

Previous studies connected knowledge with communicators acting as managers. Such knowledge came from formal education, reading trade publications and participating in professional associations (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). My survey results showed that a quarter of religion communicators had no formal communication training. Few religion communicators read trade publications or belonged to secular communication organizations. That might mean some religion communicators didn't have the background to think of themselves as anything more than technicians.

By concentrating on technical aspects of communication output, religion communicators may not be providing the public relations guidance that top executives say they expect. Consequently, communicators may be limiting any role they may have in fostering relationships, encouraging cooperation and discouraging polarization. Furthermore, by focusing on persuasion, publicity and positive media coverage, religion communicators may not think to develop the kinds of initiatives that Dietz (2009), Tilson (2009) and Williams (2009) describe.

The communication environment has changed in the nearly two years since I finished my surveys. Social media, for instance, have become much more important public relations tools. In fact, people are calling public relations in this interactive environment PR 2.0. Religion

communicators in my survey weren't involved much with Web 2.0 media, such as blogs or podcasts.

Capabilities of social media change how organizations can relate to various publics. The interactive Web 2.0 world reflects Slife's (2004) strong relationality. People are part of the Facebook or Twitter universe by virtue of signing up. What they believe doesn't affect community membership. Forcing everyone on the network to agree or leave isn't likely. Members are different. They seek out engagements. Members don't avoid conflicts. Dialogue is often robust, and online communities continue to grow.

If religion communicators are to make effective contributions to interreligious and intercultural dialogues—especially in an interactive Web 2.0 world—they need a new understanding of community. Religion communicators need to see a primary family connection between children of God. God initiated the relationship at creation. We, as part of that creation, can't escape that context. In fact, that relationship defines our being. We may choose not to acknowledge the relationship. But it is always there.

The strong relational perspective changes how we approach intercultural dialogue, engage issues and handle conflict. Each member of God's family is individual and different—theologically, politically and socially. Family members won't agree on everything. Nevertheless, they remain part of the community. This strong relational community requires such difference as it engages issues through dialogue.

I experienced such issue engagement over the past quarter-century as a communicator in The United Methodist Church. Much as the *Faith & Values Newsletter* reported, factions within the denomination argued vehemently over many social issues, such as abortion, stewardship of the environment, the proper role of women or minorities in the church, and homosexuality. From a weak relational perspective, these debates would be seen as a threat to church unity. Indeed, many church leaders and communicators did view them that way. They often looked for ways to reduce and resolve conflicts. But that seldom worked. The factions haven't changed their positions very much over the years. The ongoing arguments haven't led to a massive exodus—or

expulsion—of members, either. The relationships of United Methodists to God and one another through Christ have held them in the community—even though they disagree vehemently.

Within the Religion Communicators Council, we have found our community in common vocational practices as well as creation. We are communicators. As individuals, we are different. We represent different faiths and hold different beliefs. We disagree on many things theologically, culturally and politically. Yet we are all part of God's family. By engaging over our differences in our meetings and publications, we learn from one another, improve public relations practice and advance our shared mission of promoting faith perspectives in public discourse.

Slife's concept of strong relationality might help both religion communicators and faith group leaders promote interreligious and intercultural dialogues. The growing influence of the interactive Web 2.0 world may even force our hands in that direction. Web 2.0 is a community based on Internet access. Belief and persuasion are not key factors. A shift to understanding community grounded in creation and not belief changes our context for public relations and interacting with others. Gone is the win-lose emphasis on making sure everyone agrees. No longer need we fear dialogue. In fact, we must embrace it. The give and take should help us grow intellectually and spiritually. We should see no need for polarization as we celebrate the diversity of God's creation.

## References

- Bakhtin, M.M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays by M.M. Bakhtin* (M. Holquest, Ed.; C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.). Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Breakenridge, D. (2008). *PR 2.0: New media, new tools, new audiences*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education Inc.
- Breakenridge, D., & DeLoughry, T.J. (2003). *The new PR tool kit: Strategies for successful media relations*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education Inc.
- Broom, G.M. (1982). A comparison of sex roles in public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 8:3, 17-22.
- Broom, G.M., & Dozier, D.M. (1986). Advancement for public relations role models. *Public Relations Review*, 12:1, 37-56.
- Broom, G.M., & Smith, G.D. (1979). Testing the practitioner's impact on clients. *Public Relations Review*, 5:3, 47-59.
- Broom, G.M., Casey, S., & Ritchey, J. (1997). Toward a concept and theory of organization-public relationships. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 9:2, 83-98.
- Clark, M.S., & Miller, J. (1993). The difference between communal and exchange relationships: What it is and is not. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 19, 684-691.
- Dietz, J. (2009, October). *Cultural and religious dialogue: A legacy of ecclesiastical art*. Cultural Dialogues, Religion and Communication, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON.
- Dozier, D.M. (1983, November). Toward a reconciliation of "role conflict" in public relations research. Paper presented at the meeting of the Western Communication Education Conference, Fullerton, CA.
- Dozier, D.M. (1984). Program evaluation and roles of practitioners. *Public Relations Review*, 10:2, 13-21.
- Dozier, D.M. (1992). The organizational roles of communication and public relations practitioners. In Grunig, J.E. (Ed.), *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* (pp. 327-356). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Dozier, D.M., & Broom, G.M. (1995). Evolution of the manager role in public relations practice. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 7, 3-26.
- Dozier, D.M., Grunig, L.A., & Grunig, J.E. (1995). *Manager's guide to excellence in public relations and communication management*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Dugan, G., Nannes, C.H., & Stross, R.M. (1979). *RPRC: A 50-year reflection*. New York: Religious Public Relations Council.
- Grunig, L.A., Grunig, J.E., & Dozier, D.M. (2002). *Excellent public relations and effective organizations*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Grunig, J.E. (Ed.) (1992). *Excellence in public relations and communication management*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Grunig, J.E. (2006). Finishing the edifice: Ongoing research on public relations as a strategic management function, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 18:2, 151-176.
- Grunig, J.E. & Hunt, T. (1984). *Managing public relations*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Hutton, James G. (1999). The definition, dimensions and domain of public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 25:2, 149-159.

- Noelle-Neumann, E. (1974). The spiral of silence: A theory of public opinion. *Journal of Communication*, 24:2, 43-51.
- Packard, V. (1957). *The hidden persuaders*. New York: David McKay Co. Inc.
- Ries, A., & Ries, L. (2002). *The fall of advertising and the rise of PR*. New York: HarperBusiness.
- Slife, B. D. (2004). Taking practice seriously: Toward a relational ontology. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, 24 (2), 157 – 178.
- Solis B., & Breakenridge, D. (2009). *Putting the public back in public relations*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education Inc.
- Stoody, R. (1959). *A handbook of church public relations*. New York: Abingdon Press.
- Tilson, D. (2009, October). *Public relations and religious diversity: Toward the common good*. Cultural Dialogues, Religion and Communication, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON.
- Weiner, M. (2006). *Unleashing the power of PR: A contrarian's guide to marketing and communication*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- Williams, S. (2009, October). *Grassroots community interfaith responses to domestic and international conflicts*. Cultural Dialogues, Religion and Communication, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, ON.

## **Public Relations and religious diversity: Toward the common good**

Donn James Tilson  
University of Miami

**Abstract:** We live in a time when there seems to be a good deal of mistrust, misunderstanding, and conflict among people of different faiths. Best-selling author and biologist Richard Dawkins has said that religion has a harmful influence on society. And, yet, in many communities, religious faithful help address many of society's most serious social problems in a positive way, and people of goodwill foster tolerance and respect through interfaith dialogue and other ecumenical initiatives. This paper will focus on the role that communicators can and do play in dispelling common fears and misconceptions that fuel "uncivil" discourse and open hostility and in promoting mutual understanding and community spirit in religiously diverse communities.

**Key words:** *Public relations, common good, religious diversity, social responsibility*

**Résumé :** Nous vivons dans un temps où la crainte, les malentendus et les conflits entre les personnes de différentes confessions dominent la vie en société. Auteur de best-sellers et biologiste, Richard Dawkins a dit que la religion a une influence nuisible sur la société. Et pourtant, dans des nombreuses collectivités, les œuvres d'inspiration religieuse aident à répondre à un bon nombre de graves problèmes sociaux de façon positive, et les gens de bonne volonté favorisent la tolérance et le respect par le biais du dialogue interreligieux et autres initiatives œcuméniques. Cette communication se concentrera sur le rôle que les « communicateurs » peuvent jouer dans la lutte contre les idées erronées et les craintes communes du discours « peu civilisé » qui incite l'hostilité, en faisant aussi la promotion de l'esprit de tolérance dans différentes communautés de croyantes.

**Mots clés :** *Relations publiques, bien commun, diversité religieuse, responsabilité sociale*



We live in a time when there seems to be a good deal of mistrust, misunderstanding, and conflict among people of different faiths. Best-selling author and biologist Richard Dawkins has said that religion has a harmful influence on society. I suppose that if all we did was to focus on the world's headline news, we could very easily come to that same conclusion. And, yet, a study by social scientist Patrick Fagan released by the Heritage Foundation in 2007 found that religious belief and practice can and does help address many of society's most serious social problems in a positive way. I'm reminded, for example, that for many faith traditions, charity is an important obligation, and faith communities often help those in need through various social service projects – homeless shelters, AIDS clinics, etc. And, what's more interesting, and encouraging, such community relations efforts often are ecumenical in nature with people of different faiths working together in a spirit of peace and love. Moreover, as we also know from our own personal experience, there are people of goodwill who foster tolerance and respect through interfaith dialogue and other initiatives, including forums such as this one.

So, how do we as people of goodwill help foster tolerance, cooperation and social responsibility in communities that are spiritually diverse? How can we dispel fears and misconceptions that fuel “uncivil” discourse? And, how do we promote mutual understanding and community spirit when media seem more interested in covering conflict than cooperation?

Let me start at home. In the U.S. the religious landscape has become multi-hued, particularly over the past 30 years. Reports indicate that the U.S. now has a million Hindus, more Muslims than Episcopalians or Presbyterians, and some 25 million Hispanic Christians. The new religious landscape in the U.S. is a consequence, in part, of the reform of immigration quotas and the arrival of peoples from developing nation-states who are re-creating their religious traditions in their adopted homeland (Bartos, 2002). The evolution of the U.S. spiritual community is not unique, however, but mirrors the diversity of religion globally, even in countries once predominantly Christian.

As we know, such diversity presents both opportunities and challenges for all of us. For example, in some U.S. communities, the “new religious America” has not been well received—physical

violence and vandalism of homes and religious spaces have been a problem. Nevertheless, in the midst of such tensions, public relations professionals and other communicators are playing a role in resolving religious conflict. Indeed, community power theorists contend that "significant others" in a community (family, friends, and others) can serve as change agents in influencing the behavior of individuals (Finnegan et al., 1990; Fischhoff, 1989; cited in McElreath, 1997).

Such efforts illustrate the nobler aspects of public relations when practiced with concern for the common good and in keeping with conceptual models that emphasize the social responsibility of the profession. Moreover, a public interest approach to public relations as practiced by religious communicators often is based on various inherent tenets of faith and mirrors internal faith community–congregant communication that is built on mutual trust, respect, and consideration.

For example, Detroit community leaders have been working successfully to diffuse tensions among peoples of different faiths. As you may know, Detroit is a truly diverse city with more than 129 distinct nationalities and the largest Arab population outside of the Middle East. Interfaith Partners, founded in the wake of 9-11, is a network of religious leaders, scholars and peace activists who work hand in hand on community projects – art exhibits, interfaith worship, “Abrahamic” salons to discuss shared faith traditions and so on. A year ago last January, the group, affiliated with the Michigan Roundtable for Diversity and Inclusion, launched the first annual Interfaith Heroes Month, which continued again this year and which many hope will become an annual celebration of those leaders who have “reached out across the boundaries of faith, ethnicity and race to build stronger communities” (Buttry, 2008). Their Web site and annual published collection of stories about various Interfaith Heroes’ – Pope John Paul II and the Dalai Lama, for example – highlight the beauty that lies within each one of us. News of their efforts prompted a delegation of Dutch officials including Dutch Cabinet Minister Francis Timmermans to meet this past April with Detroit-area Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders to learn more about fostering a climate of tolerance (Krupa, 2009). As you know, Dutch society has been struggling with bigotry toward its Muslim community. At the conclusion of their visit, Timmermans observed that the road to social integration “begins with talking to each other about our differences. Social peace is brought about not just by what you share, but by what you accept as different” (ibid: 2).

Of course, in Detroit, as elsewhere, the road to peaceful co-existence is not always smooth. Following the Persian Gulf War, for example, "many Detroit-area students of Jewish, Chaldean [pre-Arab Iraqis, mostly Catholic, numbering more than 100,000 in the area], and Muslim backgrounds ... were emotionally upset and hurt because they had relatives in Israel, Iraq or in the armed forces either here or in the Middle East" (Tracy, 2003: 10). "No accurate flow of information" and "a lot of misunderstanding among the staff and students" led to "ill will and tensions" in the public schools, particularly at West Bloomfield High where 16% of the students were Chaldean-American. In October 2002, civic and religious leaders created the West Bloomfield School-Community Mid-East Task Force, a group that included various religions and cultures, the police, local government and student leaders. Fact sheets explaining each religion were developed and distributed throughout the school and the community, and "a series of multiethnic and religious panel discussions" were held (ibid.). With such avenues for dialogue, community tensions were diffused.

The following year, the Detroit chapter of the Public Relations Society of America organized a workshop at the Arab Cultural Center for Economic and Social Services to educate members and the general public about the history and growing influence of Arab-Americans in the city and the role of public relations in a multicultural society. Local civic and business leaders attended the program, organized with the help of public relations students from Eastern Michigan University. The Detroit chapter started its diversity program in 2002, led by my good friend and colleague Renée Ahee, and regularly organizes luncheons to showcase international holiday celebrations, workshops such as the one I just mentioned and others, for example, at Detroit's Holocaust Museum, as well as roundtable discussions and receptions to bring together diverse faith, ethnic and cultural communities. Fittingly, the Detroit chapter received a National Diversity Award for outstanding leadership at the Public Relations Society of America's International Conference in 2003, the first year that PRSA presented its awards. Renee has continued her good work and was kind enough to share her insights during a national teleseminar on religion and public relations I organized in 2005 as chair of PRSA's International Professional Interest Section and to join a School of Communication panel exploring some of the same issues at the University of Miami in 2008 alongside my other good friend and colleague, Dr. Doug Cannon. Renee continues to chair the chapter's Multicultural Committee, and last year co-founded a group of Arab, Jewish and

African-American women who probe various issues including religious differences. They call themselves the Museum Ladies, and I can just imagine how exciting their discussions must be when they host a Night at the Museum. I'm sure, like the displays in the movie of the same name, everyone comes alive at their meetings.

And speaking of Doug, I would be remiss if I did not mention the good work of the organization he leads as president, the Religion Communicators Council. Founded in 1929, RCC is "an international interfaith association of religion communicators at work in print and electronic communication, marketing and in public relations" (<http://www.religioncommunicators.org>). Through programming at national conferences and local chapters around the U.S., Council members "promote excellence in the communication of religious faith and values in the public arena and encourage understanding among religious and faith groups" (ibid.). For example, the Council's Wilbur Awards recognize excellence in the communication of religious issues, values and themes in the secular media, while its DeRose-Hinkhouse Memorial Awards honor those who demonstrate excellence in religious communications and public relations. Most recently, an RCC scholarship student – a graduate of Washington University in St. Louis and member of the Muslim Students Association – was among 30 interfaith fellows selected by the Tony Blair Faith Foundation to visit humanitarian projects against malaria in Africa and then educate youth groups and religious communities through programs to promote awareness of the disease. In using their skills in communication, these young fellows demonstrate the important role that faith can play in doing something positive and compassionate.

Other communities like Detroit also are pushing forward with programs to combat religious stereotypes and promote tolerance among citizens. At St. Cloud State University in central Minnesota, the campus community has struggled with graffiti, such as swastikas, and other expressions of racial, ethnic and religious hatred as the school's minority and immigrant population has grown. In response, staff, students and the local community have countered with public rallies, graphic campaigns promoting diversity, especially of religion, workshops, and courses on multiculturalism that address the issue (Condon, 2008; Pabst, 2008). Additionally, a leadership council and various working groups of campus and community leaders have been instituted to deal with concerns on an ongoing basis. Both the university and the community are committed to creating and sustaining a culturally respectful living, working and educational

environment ([www.stcloudstate.edu/care](http://www.stcloudstate.edu/care)). Some graffiti still mars campus but a unity of purpose against intolerance seems to be winning the day. In Victoria, Australia, religion teachers from Muslim and Christian high schools also have responded to religious intolerance by developing suggested curriculums and a list of “balanced and useable” texts about the history and values of the two faiths. With help from Australian Catholic University and the Muslim-run Australian Intercultural Society, they hope these materials will help teachers to address “the lack of understanding some of their students had shown about the different faiths” (Cooke, 2008). Eventually, plans are to develop a framework for teaching about all faiths in school.

Even when conflict does not galvanize a campus or community, people of goodwill can come together to celebrate their differences with help from those of us in the communication profession. My public relations students at the University of Miami, for example, have helped our campus ministry to organize and promote religious diversity activities. As a class project, we have assisted with the logistics and publicity for student interfaith panel discussions, musical expressions of faith, and candlelight vigils for peace. And, we’ve been honored with a *Florida Leader* magazine’s “Best of Florida Schools” award in recognition of the impact our efforts have had on campus relations (Tilson & Venkateswaran, 2004). As my students have learned how to apply their skills on real-life projects, they also have learned something more important – how to use their talents for the common good.

Education certainly is essential if we are to promote mutual understanding whether among youngsters or their parents. As the Dalai Lama wrote earlier this year in a letter defending the Department of Religious Studies at Florida International University from those who wished to save money by eliminating the program (Kaleem, 2009: 1B): “In our deeply interconnected world, understanding and appreciation of diversity of religions is critical in fostering a culture of genuine tolerance and peaceful coexistence.”

I’m glad to say that the university’s board of trustees had a change of heart, in light of the Dalai Lama’s \$100,000 donation and offer to fundraise for the department, and decided to keep the program intact. Of course, just the thought that they would even consider doing away with such an important area of study should give us all pause.

But talking and teaching about religious diversity only carries us so far. As the Epistle of James observes, “Faith without works is dead.” If we are to truly foster a greater appreciation of various religious traditions, and the value of faith itself, we must spotlight those acts of kindness inspired by faith. Let me share just a few of these with you.

The Shiva-Vishnu Temple in Livermore, California, through its Human Services arm (whose motto is “Serve God By Serving Humanity”), considers that it has “the responsibility of serving the communities locally and globally ... irrespective of religion, race, and cultural identity depending upon the available funds, on a priority and need basis” (Tilson & Venkateswaran, 2006: 127). The temple offers free basic health screening services for half a day twice a month, although patients are requested to donate in cash and in-kind, and, while “the services are meant for visiting devotees and their friends and relatives, they are open to all independent of any restrictions” (ibid). In total, there are 16 different service projects – some aimed at the larger community – including activities with senior centers, support to other nonprofit organizations dedicated to human services, distribution of clothing, blankets, and toys in India and the United States and donations to victims of natural disaster. The Livermore Amador Valley Transit Authority, a government agency that provides public transport to surrounding cities and unincorporated areas, has recognized the work of the temple “for its contribution to the local community ... and the senior transportation program that LAVTA champions” (ibid: 128).

The Sri Siva Vishnu Temple in Lanham, Maryland, also has a community-minded focus, given its location in Washington, D.C., a city with significant diversity. The temple’s vision, featured on its Web site, emphasizes good citizenship through community service and dialogue:

Sri Siva Vishnu Temple ... has become a place that brings together Hindu customs and heritage with American values of community and volunteerism focusing on Hindu families as well as the broader community. ... offering help through local charities such as soup kitchens and shelters. (ibid).

Similarly, thanks to encouragement from the Council on American-Islamic Relations, Muslims around the U.S. have been helping their neighbors in need. Projects have included bringing food and supplies to homeless shelters in Sacramento, California, collecting school supplies for

underprivileged children in Columbus, Ohio, conducting a public health fair in Cincinnati, and, closer to my home, providing clothes, toiletries and food to the homeless on the streets of Miami (Latifi, 2006; Beras, 2007). I am proud to say that many of those involved in that project are Muslim students from the University of Miami who organized a community service group on campus. And, I might add that adults have followed their lead. Last year, eight South Florida Islamic centers presented several thousand dollars through the local Council for American-Islamic Relations to the Archdiocese of Miami and Catholic Charities to help victims of a cyclone in Burma. Leaders of these two faith traditions and the Jewish community meet regularly to explore ways of partnering on projects (Leal-Gonzalez, 2008).

One story in my community particularly illustrates this interfaith and neighborly sense of caring. Last year an early morning fire destroyed a synagogue on Miami Beach. It was the third day of Passover, prayer shawls and books were damaged, the congregation's Torah had been stolen, and, as the rabbi said, "we were devastated" (Marte, 2008: 3B). But, help was on the way even as the FBI and local authorities combed through the rubble. Joined by Rabbi Solomon Schiff of the Greater Miami Jewish Federation, Archbishop John Favalora visited the synagogue and presented the congregation with a \$5,000 donation to buy a new Torah; he also offered the use of two Catholic churches on Miami Beach for Passover and Shabbat services (ibid; Benn, 2008). The month before, Favalora explained, an arsonist had destroyed a Catholic church just prior to Holy Week; "I knew what that meant to the congregation," he said (Marte, ibid.). A local Hispanic activist group also offered its support, commenting that "when one person or group is attacked or discriminated against, we are all attacked" (Benn, 2008, p. 2B). Other members of the community also came to the rescue as congregants and friends hosted fundraisers. The congregation eventually moved into rented space, and an anonymous donor from another county purchased and donated a new Torah and prayer books; the Jewish donor explained that she was not religious but that she had heard the news and wanted to honor her parents and sister who had died recently with her gift – "they were very good people," she said (Valdemoro, 2008a: 2B). A month later, the congregation held a special dedication ceremony for their new Torah and then walked in celebration carrying it from their temporary space to the burned out synagogue (Valdemoro, 2008b). "The outpouring of support has been overwhelming," said the Chabad's rabbi; "we're going to come back stronger" (Valdemoro, 2008a: 1B).



Like me, I'm sure you are encouraged by such stories. They attest to the goodness that lies within each one of us, regardless of our faith tradition, and what we can do together to help one another especially in the face of evil. But, we as professionals in communication, whether educators or practitioners, still have a long way to go in fostering religious dialogue and mutual understanding. Most public relations associations have yet to fully focus on religion either as a topic for discussion or research. The Public Relations Society of America, the profession's premier association in the U.S., offers a host of Interest Sections – Technology, Food and Beverage to name a few – but does not have a Section on Religion. Moreover, the Society has only more recently addressed religion in its programming, with a panel discussion on the impact of faith on global issues at the United Nations in January 2005 and a teleseminar on religious diversity and community relations in June 2005, both moderated by this speaker. Its sister-like organization, the Association for Educators in Journalism and Mass Communication's Public Relations Division – the largest organization of public relations educators in the world – however, has yet to include the topic of religion and public relations in its conferences (Tilson, 2009). And, as an area of public relations research, religion is unexplored territory with few articles having been published in the profession's leading journals (Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, & Jones, 2003). Certainly, if religion is as central to society as we know it is, public relations professionals should be as attentive to the role that faith plays in forming the cultural environment of communities as they are to language, customs, cultural distance, and other behavioral aspects, something advertising and marketing professionals have known for years (Mueller, 1996).

A key to focusing more attention on religion from a public relations perspective may lie in broadening communication's traditional definitions of diversity beyond that of race, ethnicity, gender and so on to include faith traditions and their underlying principles and in gaining a greater appreciation of the nature and use of communication within such faith traditions (Hon and Brunner, 2000).

We know that facilitating civil discourse will not be easy, and in many cases it will not even be newsworthy. As the director of Catholic Relief Services once commented, "teaching tolerance,



reconciliation, cooperation, and mutual understanding is not glamorous, and it probably doesn't seem very urgent. TV cameras don't roll when sanity prevails or when children of different ethnic backgrounds and traditions learn and play together" (Hackett, 2004:2), but "interreligious dialogue, especially in conflict-ridden societies...is a much-preferred alternative to slaughtering one another" (Bole, 2003:5). Inasmuch as communication, mutual education, and understanding are requisites for harmonious co-existence in today's complex societies, civic-minded public relations professionals can play an important role in managing and resolving conflict through open communication and negotiation as we've seen. In short, religious diversity calls for all those of goodwill to celebrate such differences through engaging their skills "to encourage dialogue, instead of diatribe," mutual cooperation and community spirit (Alvarez, 1995: 22-23) and to conduct the research necessary to broaden and deepen the body of knowledge.

My hope is that all of us will move forward from here to transform our world into a global community that is civil, ethical and equitable for all peoples. For a basic moral test of society is the welfare of its most vulnerable members. Indeed the only way to build peace is to pursue goodness with courage and perseverance, and to ask God, in the words of St. Francis, "to make us instruments of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy". In seeking more to console than to be consoled, to understand more than to be understood, to love more than to be loved, to give more than to receive, and to pardon more than to be pardoned, we will truly be all that we are called to be. And, in using our time, our talent, and, yes, even our treasure, in following such a path, we will not only best serve our profession, but we will best serve the common good.

## References

- Alvarez, P. (1995, June). A House Divided: Communicating to a Fractured Society. Speech presented to Ball State University, Muncie, IN.
- Bartos, P. (2002, April 21). Why our new religious pluralism is good for America. *Our Sunday Visitor*, p. 10.
- Benn, E. (2008, April 24). FBI joins synagogue fire probe. *The Miami Herald*, p. 2B.
- Beras, E. (2007, January 8). Muslim group offers hot meal – and hope. *The Miami Herald*, p. 1B.
- Bole, W. (2003, November 16). Is religion the problem, or the solution? *Our Sunday Visitor*, p. 5.
- Buttry, D. (2008). *Interfaith Heroes*. Canton, MI: Read the Spirit Books.
- Condon, P. (2008, January 29). College struggles with racism. *The Miami Herald*, p. 3A.
- Cooke, D. (2008, April 12). Teachers in bid to boost religious tolerance. *The Age* (Melbourne, Australia). Retrieved May 22, 2008 from <http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/teachers-in-bid-to-boost-religious-tolerance/2008/04/11/1207856836923.html>
- Hackett, K. (2004, June). [Letter to membership]. Baltimore: Catholic Relief Services.
- Hon, L., & Brunner, B. (2000). Diversity Issues and Public Relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 12(4), 309-340.
- Kaleem, J. (2009, May 26). Dalai Lama wants to aid FIU. *The Miami Herald*, p. 1B.
- Krupa, G. (2009, April 9). Dutch leaders visit Dearborn to learn pointers on tolerance. *The Detroit News*. Retrieved July 6, 2009 from <http://infoweb.newsbank.com.iiiprxy.library.miami.edu/iw-search/we/InfoWeb>
- Latifi, S. (2006, July 8). Muslims step up as volunteers. *The Miami Herald*, p. 9A.
- Leal-Gonzalez, Y. (2008, June 20-July 3). Muslim leaders present check to Catholic Charities. *The Florida Catholic*, p. A13.
- Marte, J. (2008, April 26). Congregation meets outside. *The Miami Herald*, p. 3B.
- McElreath, M. (1997). *Managing systematic and ethical public relations campaigns* (2nd ed.). Dubuque, IA: Brown & Benchmark.
- Mueller, B. (1996). *International Advertising: Communicating Across Cultures*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.
- Pabst, L. (2008, September 3). Racist symbol found on St. Cloud State University campus. *Star Tribune*. Retrieved September 24, 2009 from <http://www.startribune.com/local/27764344.html>
- Sallot, L., Lyon, L., Acosta-Alzuru, C., & Jones, K. (2003). From aardvark to zebra: A new millennium analysis of theory development in public relations academic journals. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 15, 27–90.
- Tilson, D. (2009). A global critique of public relations research: Moving beyond conventional views to alternative perspectives. *African Communication Research*. In press.
- Tilson, D., & Venkateswaran, A. (2004). Toward a peaceable kingdom: Public relations and religious diversity in the U.S. *Public Relations Quarterly*, 49(2), 37–44.
- Tilson, D., & Venkateswaran, A. (2006). Toward a covenantal model of public relations: Hindu faith communities and devotional-promotional communication. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 5(2), August 2006, pp. 111-133.
- Tracy, T. (2003, February 9). Chaldeans don't support Saddam, but worry about war ramifications. *Our Sunday Visitor*, p. 10.

Valdemoro, T. (2008a, May 27). Donors helping synagogue replace Torah lost in blaze. *The Miami Herald*, p. 1B.

Valdemoro, T. (2008b, June 16). From loss to joy. *The Miami Herald*, p. 1B

**Grassroots community inter-faith responses to domestic  
and international conflicts:  
Case studies from Wales & England**

Shereen Williams  
Council of Ethnic Minority Voluntary Sector Organizations  
Radio Salaam-Shalom

**Abstract:** In recent years interfaith dialogue has become a central feature in the efforts to diffuse simmering tensions between faith minorities and majorities that threaten community cohesion in Western societies. Increasingly a wide range of complex global issues are impacting on our communities where people share an ethnic or religious affiliation to the protagonists. As the harmful effects of distant conflicts threaten to widen rifts within society, members of effected communities are sensing the urgency to engage efforts to promote dialogue and unity as extremist groups attempt to exploit fears and divisions. Such dialogue is now taking place on a number of different levels within towns and cities across the UK with varying degrees of success. These community-led initiatives of second tier diplomacy cannot expect to eliminate the sources of global conflict, and indeed are not designed to do so, but prevent harmful localised effects outside the arena of conflict. Such efforts do not currently benefit from joined up working and although the sharing good practice is increasing, the dissemination of such information is still restricted. This presentation will focus on two case studies in England and Wales where both domestic terrorism and international military conflict has produced grassroots responses to minimize tensions between citizens.

**Key words:** *Jews, Muslims, UK, interfaith dialogue, community activism*

**Résumé :** Au cours des dernières années, le dialogue interreligieux est devenu une fonction centrale dans les efforts visant à réduire les tensions entre les minorités religieuses et les « majorités », tensions qui menacent la cohésion de la communauté dans les sociétés occidentales. Un grand éventail de problèmes mondiaux complexes a un impact sur nos communautés où les gens qui partagent une affiliation ethnique ou religieuse avec les protagonistes de ces conflits. Étant donné que les effets nuisibles des conflits lointains menacent de s'élargir au sein de la société, les membres des communautés affectées ressentent l'urgence d'engager plus d'efforts pour promouvoir le dialogue et l'unité, face à un groupe extrémiste qui essaye d'exploiter les craintes et les divisions. Ce dialogue prend maintenant lieu dans différents niveaux dans les villes et villages du Royaume-Uni avec différents degrés de succès. Ces initiatives communautaires de deuxième niveau diplomatique ne peuvent pas s'attendre à ce que les sources de conflit mondial soient éliminées et en effet, elles ne sont pas conçues pour le faire, mais pour éviter les effets nocifs limités à l'extérieur de ces conflits. Ces efforts ne se traduisent pas dans un bénéfice du travail collectif, bien qu'il y ait plus de partage des bonnes pratiques, mais la diffusion de ces informations reste encore limitée. Cette présentation se concentrera sur deux études : un cas en Angleterre et un autre dans les pays de Galles où le terrorisme intérieur et le conflit militaire international a produit des réactions des communautés afin de réduire les tensions entre les citoyens.

**Mots clés :** *Juifs, musulmans, Royaume-Uni, dialogue interreligieux, activisme communautaire*

## **British Muslims in the First Decade of the New Millennium**

2001 was a significant year for British Muslims. For the first time in 2001, the UK Census included an optional question on faith and belief (National Statistics website). This was the first concerted effort ever made to collect hard data on a national scale and when the results were published in 2003, it provided a snapshot of the faith groups across the nation and showed that approximately 2.7% of the UK population were Muslims.

In the months of May, June and July, major civil disturbances had occurred in the towns of Oldham, Burnley and Bradford between Asians and whites. The majority of Asians involved were Muslim youth and this triggered a broadsheet and tabloid media debate focusing on British Muslims which became a preoccupation in mainstream society that has still yet to die down.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US sparked a backlash in the UK against Muslim communities (IHRC:2002). This also marked the beginning of a change of focus by the far-right movement from the scape-goating of minority groups in general for all society's problems, to instead singling out Muslims and playing to popular fears in the hope of attracting support and votes. Harris (2001) highlighted Nick Griffin's (the leader of the British National Party) assertion that, *"Islam is the biggest threat Britain has ever faced"*.

Whilst fear and suspicion of Muslims as a faith minority grew and with articles reinforcing popular myths and prejudices regularly appearing in sections of the media, efforts to counter the negative mainstream discourse were taking place around the UK. Unfortunately these were spontaneous rather than co-ordinated activities and movements; there was no unified approach and a limited sharing of success stories and good practise.

At the same time, present in the back of everyone's minds was the nightmare scenario of a 9/11 type incident happening in the UK. Such an event would not have been a first for the UK as the IRA had carried out numerous bomb attacks on mainland Britain. Within a ten year period from 1990 to 2000, the IRA had attacked the London Stock Exchange, 10 Downing Street and the MI6 headquarters. During decades of domestic terrorism, the Irish community in Britain faced significant prejudice. The British can still recall how back in those days some shops even used to display signs saying 'No dogs, no blacks and no Irish'. It

is clear that there was a precedent within living memory of entire communities being criminalized due to the actions of a minority element carrying out terrorist activity for a political goal behind a religious fig leaf.

Unfortunately on 7<sup>th</sup> of July 2005, the nightmare scenario became a reality as four British Muslims blew themselves up on London's public transport systems (three underground trains and one double-decker bus). This resulted in 56 deaths and injuries to more than 770 people as reported by the BBC (last updated 2008).

This attack caused shockwaves throughout British society not only because of the number of casualties involved, but the fact that the perpetrators were all born and brought up in the UK (with the exception of one bomber who was born in Jamaica but had moved to the UK when he was barely one year old). Socialism Today (2005) was not wrong in suggesting that when Tony Blair, who was Prime Minister at that point in time, told Parliament that terrorism “....*can only be taken on and defeated by the Muslim community...*”, it was akin to laying the blame of 7/7 on the 1.6million British Muslims. Overnight the loyalty of British Muslims was called into question and just like in the wake 9/11, Britain witnessed a backlash against its Muslim communities. The constant and negative attention elicited varied reactions across the British Muslim communities with the ‘traditional and conservative’ members choosing to keep silent and tried to become as ‘invisible’ as possible, tolerating abuse and victimization in silence. The more proactive groups including the Muslim Council of Britain and the British Muslim Forum, worked together and convened a meeting of Islamic scholars and leaders which resulted in a joint statement (MCB 2005) condemning the attacks and the perpetrators. However a small extreme minority did come out publicly to express their abhorrent stance of supporting the attacks and were given widespread media coverage which was grossly disproportionate to both their actual numbers and their influence in Muslim communities. This only further intensified the negative press coverage of Muslims collectively as highlighted by Moore, Mason and Lewis (2008:4) that approximately 36% of stories involving British Muslims are related to terrorism notably post 9/11 and 7/7. Where the mainstream media seem to have a fixation about everything and anything negative to do with Muslims as a faith minority in the UK, there were positive voices struggling to be heard. The two case studies highlighted in this paper are examples of good news stories which made it into local and in some cases national and global media. The vast majority of grassroots

interfaith projects rarely get this level of exposure which would give the average person the perception that such efforts are not the norm.

### **Case Study 1: Interfaith Swansea**

Swansea is the second largest city in Wales and is home to the third largest Muslim population in a country of 3 million people. In the immediate aftermath of 7/7, the initial response of the Muslim community was sadly not mirrored in many other parts of the UK. A number of local organizations released a joint press statement on the same day itself condemning the attacks in no uncertain terms.

The local Muslim community quickly moved from being reactive to proactive with a number of young community activists getting in touch with other faith leaders and through utilising personal contacts with other communities to propose a city-wide event that would show solidarity and oppose terrorism. Over the course of a month, numerous meetings were held to decide on the nature of the event and some key issues discussed included funding, publicity and obtaining political buy-in from the local city council.

Whilst it was encouraging that most faith groups in the city responded positively and sent representatives, the first challenge faced by those present at the first meeting was the simple fact that most of them were strangers to each other. This was the first time many had met face to face having been only in contact via email in the majority of cases. There was initial suspicion over the interfaith nature of the initiative as people in the city were used to the faith groups functioning independently of each other. The concept of interfaith was new for some of those present and others held a distorted view of what interfaith was i.e. a watering down of individual faiths in order to create a ‘multifaith soup’ out of a melting pot of religious beliefs and practises.

After much discussion it was decided that the key message of the event was that the faith communities of Swansea opposed all forms of terror and that the ‘remembrance’ element of the event was for all victims of terror and not just 7/7. Each faith community then selected a speaker for the day to give their faith’s perspective against terrorism. However, whilst each speaker was given 5 minutes, the group decided that the Muslim speaker should be given 20 minutes as the Muslim community were most adversely affected in the fall-out of 7/7. This extended speech would give the community an opportunity to reiterate its unequivocal

condemnation of the attacks and remove any doubt in the minds of mainstream society that the Muslim minority in their midst felt anything other than exactly the same way as everyone else about the tragedy.

The date 11<sup>th</sup> September was deliberately chosen for its significance and in the weeks leading up to it, the faith representatives involved with the planning went about publicising the event to their respective communities. Letters were sent to all the local councillors, all faith leaders and places of worship in the region and to schools in Swansea. The local and national media were sent press releases in advance, which resulted in significant pre-event press coverage and also during the event itself.

The occasion managed to attract over 300 attendees ranging from children to older people and from the diverse faith communities of Swansea. It was the first time such a gathering had taken place and given that it was done at such short notice it was considered to be a significant achievement for a group that had never previously worked together.

The success of the event made the group realise that constant dialogue was needed between the faith communities in Swansea and not just during times of crisis. A desire to facilitate structured dialogue and to make the interfaith activities sustainable, led to the creation of Swansea Faiths Forum by the original group.

Whilst membership was open to everyone, the group had to deal with the details of the management of the organization. It was decided that each faith community with the exception of the Christian community would have one representative each on the management committee. The representative would be selected by the faith community themselves. The Christian community were given 4 slots to reflect their significant majority and also to ensure that the main denominations were represented. One notable action of the forum was the inclusion of representation from the spiritual and holistic community. Traditional interfaith set-ups had rarely engaged with this particular group, preferring instead to limit dialogue between established world faiths. The group wanted the forum to reflect the ethos of inclusion and pluralism and in August 2006, the Swansea Faiths Forum became a constituted organization with the following aims -

- To advance public knowledge and mutual understanding of the different faith and spiritual communities living in the City & County of Swansea for public benefit.



- To build bridges between people of all faiths & beliefs, and none, to foster tolerance, respect, friendship and peace and help reduce prejudice and ignorance.
- To work in harmony with other organizations in the community on issues of concern to faith and spiritual groups.
- To be an inspiration and resource for the wider Swansea community.

Representation on the Forum was a catalyst for the holistic and spiritual community in Swansea to organise themselves into an official body and they established the Minority Faiths Alliance with the following aims –

- To advance public knowledge and mutual understanding of the many and diverse minority faith and spiritual groups in Swansea.
- To form an alliance of these minority faith and spiritual groups in order to participate in local and national interfaith dialogues.
- To build bridges of communication and understanding between minority faiths and traditional faiths in order to foster tolerance, respect, friendship and peace; and to alleviate prejudice and ignorance.
- To benefit the people of Swansea through conflict resolution, community building, positive inclusion and the celebration of diversity, especially with reference to issues of faith and spirituality.
- To advance public knowledge on the relationship between spirituality, healthcare, citizenship and ecological sustainability to the benefit of the people of Swansea.

This allowed those who were not part of the traditional world faith communities in the city to have their interests represented at the same level as those from the more established faith groups. It is interesting to note that as a result of this, the Interfaith Forum for Wales recently expanded their representation to include the holistic and spiritual community.

With both the Forum and the Alliance existing as constituted organizations, an informal umbrella association was then created between them and Interfaith Swansea became the collective name that both groups operated under. This was seen as the Swansea model that incorporated three key innovative features -

1. It was about ordinary people of different faiths doing things together in the community - a grass roots, people-led initiative not a directive from the government or faith institutions – a bottom up rather than top down approach.

2. It was a socially inclusive model that provided opportunities for minority and marginalised faiths and contemporary spiritual beliefs to have a voice alongside the traditional world religions. This holistic approach acknowledged that everyone matters and that everyone is interconnected.
3. It aimed to be sustainable and environmentally responsible – to operate under sound sustainability principles and practices that promote and encourage environmental responsibility and interaction amongst all the faith communities.

### **Key Achievements of Interfaith Swansea**

In order to encourage greater understanding between the faith communities, Interfaith Swansea began to hold meetings in the various places of worship. Each faith community took turns hosting meetings and members would be taken on a tour of the place of worship and not only learned more about the theological aspects of the host faith, they also were made aware of the history of the particular faith community within Wales.

Between 2006 and 2009, funding was awarded from the Community Development Foundation, Swansea Council for Voluntary Services, Swansea Lord Mayor's Fund and Communities@One to deliver a series of projects.

1. Celebration of Youth Event

Similar to the original remembrance event, Interfaith Swansea organised a showcase of performance by young people from the various faith communities. About 600 people attended this highly successful event, which involved a symbolic planting ceremony that was undertaken by children from different faith communities to sow the seeds for working together on environmental projects in the future.

2. Directory of Faith and Spirituality

A directory was compiled listing all the places of worship within the city and key contacts. Faith-based voluntary sector organizations were also included. This information was then published into the form of a booklet and was not only well-received by the faith communities but also by the local council and the university as it became an additional and useful resource. This was also the first time such a booklet had been produced in Wales and it went on to become an income-generating project with the University of Swansea being the first to order copies for their new intake of international students.

3. Swansea Green Map of Faith and Spirituality

The environment was a cause that Interfaith Swansea saw as an opportunity to unite communities across the city and county of Swansea, as caring for the Earth was a responsibility shared by everyone. In partnership with Sustainable Swansea and inspired by the Swansea Green Map, places of worship, faith study centres and sacred places were asked to sign up to a green pledge, which required them to take steps to ensure that their premises were ‘green’ i.e. low carbon footprint environmentally friendly establishments. This map was a world’s first and is available in print and online via the Sustainable Swansea site.

#### 4. Digital Media Project

Interfaith Swansea worked with faith communities whose adherents came largely from black and minority ethnic backgrounds in Swansea delivered ICT and digital media training to them. Participants were then teamed up in multi-faith groups to use the skills and knowledge that they had acquired to create their own digital stories. These stories were then shared across the faith communities in Swansea.

#### 5. Involving Young People

Traditionally, interfaith dialogue was seen to be the preserve of older people and particularly men (see Interfaith UK 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary report: 2007). Interfaith Swansea has been able to involve young people in interfaith dialogue through engaging with local youth groups (both faith based and non-faith based) via the digital media project and by providing volunteering opportunities at Interfaith Swansea events. The involvement of young people at its inception meant that Interfaith Swansea was well-placed to attract and retain younger members. In addition, Peace Mala, a project that primarily worked with schools to increase understanding and respect for different faith traditions, came under the banner of Interfaith Swansea. As a result of this link-up, Interfaith Swansea was able to support schools and colleges in Swansea to host interfaith awareness days for their students.

### **Key Challenges and Lessons Learnt**

From the time interfaith dialogue began via an informal group to its existence today as the umbrella body of Interfaith Swansea, those involved have faced numerous challenges. At times compromises had to be made and those involved have had to review their aims and objectives.

#### 1. Attitudes towards Interfaith Dialogue

There were 2 main types of attitudes that were causing conflict within the group. The first type was the attitudes of some individuals who believed that all paths lead to god and in essence it does not really matter what you believe. This caused particular offence to some of those from the traditional world faiths who held certain positions of principle from their faith's perspective which were being dismissed out of hand by such individuals. The second type was the 'evangelical' attitude that everyone who was not following the same faith needed to be 'saved' or converted. These two attitudes were not conducive to dialogue and in order to minimise conflict within the membership, it was decided that each member had to sign up to a code of conduct that was adopted from Interfaith Network UK (1993, 2005).

Key elements include:-

- Respecting other people's freedom within the law to express their beliefs and convictions
- Learning to understand what others actually believe and value, and letting them express this in their own terms
- Respecting the convictions of others about food, dress and social etiquette and not behaving in ways which cause needless offence
- Recognising that all of us at times fall short of the ideals of our own traditions and never comparing our own ideals with other people's practices
- Respecting the right of others to disagree with us

It is important to note that in order for interfaith dialogue to be successful, the motivation of participants has to be one of developing good relations. In the case of Interfaith Swansea, those who had initially become involved with the aim of 'conversion' eventually chose to minimise their participation once it became clear that they could not achieve their aims.

## 2. The Issue of Representation

There was a significant amount of discussion that took place around the issue of faith representation. With management structures being formalised, each faith community's representation needed to be incorporated within the constitution. For the smaller faith groups i.e. Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs etc it was easy to decide that they would put forward one representative each. For the Christian faith, it required an in-depth debate on how the various denominations would be represented and whether the number of representatives put forward should reflect the fact that they were the largest faith group. Various solutions were looked at and in order to prevent the management

committee from becoming too large and unmanageable, the Interfaith Council for Wales model was adopted and the Christian faith was represented by the following denominations: Anglican, Catholic, Free Church and Evangelical Alliance.

Once the set-up was finalised, each individual faith community had to decide on the type of representation they wanted. Would it have to be a faith leader for example a church leader for the Christian groups, an imam for the Muslims etc or could a community activist be nominated as a representative. As this was a grassroots movement, each community made their decision independently of one another. This was goodwill and trust building exercise as everyone had to accept the representatives put forward by each individual faith community.

### 3. Loss of Focus Caused by Expansion and Funding

From a group of individuals meeting informally, the group morphed into an organization and a significant amount of funding was secured. By accepting funding to deliver projects, the organization became responsible for staff and had to meet funder's requirements by working towards agreed outputs. This meant that focus was now on project delivery as opposed to general interfaith work i.e. faith visits. This caused a fair amount of tension within the group as the older members felt that managing the projects were taking up too much time, whereas the younger members saw the projects as an innovative approach to interfaith work that allowed Interfaith Swansea to help faith communities improve their skills base. To manage the tension, a working group was set up with the sole purpose of managing the projects and overseeing the staff and the group providing an overall report to management. This allowed the management to continue running general interfaith work and activities.

Interfaith Swansea has been held as a beacon in the interfaith movement within Wales. At first public meeting of Interfaith Swansea, Brigid Bowen, the Interfaith Officer of Interfaith Council for Wales said, "*If Interfaith work in Wales was a bus, Swansea would be driving it.*" This grassroots response to the tragic events of 7/7 has now evolved into a vibrant, community-led organization that is socially inclusive and plays a key role in promoting community cohesion locally.

## **Case Study 2: Radio Salaam Shalom (a project of Salaam Shalom)**

*"Basically when you think of two communities who don't get on, the first one you think of is Jews and Muslims."* Farooq Siddique (Daily Mail: 2007)

Radio Salaam Shalom was an idea borne out of dialogue sessions between Muslim and Jewish students at Bristol University and the University of the West of England that began in 2005. Jewish and Muslim chaplains at the two universities recognising that serious international tensions had the potential to affect relations between students on campus initiated dialogue sessions on non-controversial subjects to begin the process of dialogue with a view to developing the dialogue to cover more contentious issues. The initial dialogue sessions focused on the fact that that year Rosh Hashana (the New Year for Jews) fell during the month of Ramadhan (the month of fasting for Muslims). The respective faith chaplains from the two universities saw this as an opportunity to initiate discussions on the similarities between the religious occasions. The Muslim chaplain, Farooq Siddique, Rabbi Ron Berry (Reform) and Rabbi Natan Levy (Orthodox) also managed to engage with the local resident Muslim and Jewish communities who participated in these discussions. Despite the fact that both the Jewish and Muslim communities were well established in the city of Bristol, with one of the synagogues' located in the heart of the Muslim community, the two communities had rarely interacted with one another.

The discussion sessions proved to be successful and it was decided that a long-term project that would encourage ongoing dialogue should be developed. Through Bristol Muslim Cultural Society, a leading Muslim voluntary sector organization in the South West of England, a grant was awarded through the Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund to develop the project. It was decided that the two communities would set up a broadcast project in the form of an online radio station that would be delivered by a new Muslim-Jewish organization that was to be constituted.

In October 2006, Salaam Shalom was set up as not-for-profit Company limited by guarantee with a board of directors made up of 5 Muslims and 5 Jews. Salaam Shalom was set up with the following aims -

- To promote positive relations and advance co-operation and understanding between the Jewish and Muslim communities in Bristol and the surrounding area

- To assist and facilitate the Jewish and Muslim communities to explore and learn about each other
- To provide opportunities for the Jewish and Muslim communities to co-operate and work together through learning, broadcasting, debate or any other legal and appropriate means.

Once Salaam Shalom existed as an entity, the joint Muslim-Jewish board worked together to carry out the following steps in order to develop project Radio Salaam Shalom:-

- Recruitment of a Station Manager
- Recruitment of volunteers from both the Jewish and Muslim communities that were trained as interviewers, presenters and broadcasters
- Securing premises for a broadcasting studio and broadcast preparation room
- Setting up the broadcasting studio and broadcast production area with appropriate equipment
- Establishing online broadcasting streams

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2007, Radio Salaam Shalom was officially launched as the first ever UK Muslim-Jewish broadcast media project and began operations based on the following principles:-

- Radio Salaam Shalom will respect both Jewish and Muslim faiths and cultures in particular, and those of all other communities the station and website may touch through its programmes and website content
- Radio Salaam Shalom will be run in a spirit of respect, co-operation and goodwill by Board members, staff and volunteers
- It is our intention that Radio Salaam Shalom will make programmes and create website content that:
  - Inform
  - Explain
  - Entertain
  - Challenge
  - Influence
  - Break down Barriers

As an online radio station, Radio Salaam Shalom has a global reach. The listeners that tune in include those from Singapore, Australia, Israel, Japan, France and the US amongst others. Programmes cover a range of topics including culture, youth interests, women's shows and also discussions on the issue of Palestine and Israel.

### **Key Achievements of Radio Salaam Shalom**

#### **1. Making Use of Technology to Expand the Dialogue from Local to Global**

As an internet station, Radio Salaam Shalom has been able to achieve a global reach not only in terms of its listenership but also its contributors. This adds an international element to its programming. With the popularity and convenience of podcasts, Radio Salaam Shalom allows anyone from around the world to send in pre-recorded programmes.

#### **2. Attracting Local, National and Global Media Coverage**

When Radio Salaam Shalom was launched, it received a significant amount of press coverage. Media outlets including BBC, Channel 4, NHK (Japan), Rai TV (Italy), Al Jazeera amongst others have given the station world-wide exposure.

#### **3. Developing Key Partnerships**

Radio Salaam Shalom has become the media partner for numerous initiatives, these include being the UK partner for the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue and the European media partner for CEJI's Europe-wide project focusing on Muslim Jewish dialogue projects and initiatives. This has enabled other successful dialogue projects around Europe to engage with the global community via Radio Salaam Shalom.

#### **4. Highlighted for Good Practise**

The Equalities and Human Rights Commission used Radio Salaam Shalom as an example of Best Practise and the UK Government Office (South West) has also acknowledged the excellent work carried out to date by selecting the station as a project of special significance. Medi4Diversity also placed Radio Salaam Shalom in the top 30 European examples of media diversity for a 2009 EU Study (Media4Diversity:2009).

#### **5. Engagement with Young People**

As the idea for Radio Salaam Shalom originated from university students, it is no surprise that they have a significant number of young volunteers. These young volunteers are not just the students; school children as young as 11 and 12 run their



own shows on Radio Salaam Shalom and the older volunteers are known to get their own young children involved.

6. Large Dedicated Volunteer Base

Radio Salaam Shalom is not just a one-man band. They have a large volunteer base which allows the project access to a diverse skills set. The board members, steering committee members and presenters are all involved in a voluntary capacity. The only paid member of staff is the Station Manager.

7. Supporting Local Events – Resource for Local Groups

Radio Salaam Shalom has been called upon by local groups and the Bristol Council to assist in providing live sound recording of key community events. For the past 2 years, Radio Salaam Shalom has been recording and providing coverage for the ‘Building the Bridge’ Conference in Bristol, which is aimed at linking up the Bristol Muslim Community with wider society. In 2007, Radio Salaam Shalom supported the local Muslim community by allowing them to take over the studios for one month to broadcast Radio Hajj on a shortwave license. This allowed members of the Muslim community who had previously not been involved with Radio Salaam Shalom to use the station facilities and learn more about the project. Once Radio Hajj ended, a number of presenters stayed on and began volunteering for Radio Salaam Shalom.

8. Diverse Group of Volunteers

The volunteers for Radio Salaam Shalom are diverse in nature. There are Rabbis, Imams, orthodox Jews, reform Jews, Jews who see themselves as ‘cultural’ rather than ‘religious’ Jews, Muslims who actively practise their faith and Muslims who do are not strict adherents to their faith. The dialogue does not just take place amongst the ‘usual suspects’. The group contains those who are ardent supporters of their co-religionists in the Palestine-Israel conflict and also those who are highly critical of those that they share a racial or religious identity and those that occupy the space in between. In obtaining different perspectives the programmes provide a more authentic voice for these two communities rather than the polarized positions that dominate the mainstream media discourse.

9. Establishing Personal Connections to Enable Perspectives from the ‘Other Side’

Through joint training and co-hosting programmes, Radio Salaam Shalom enabled its volunteers to develop friendships across the religious divider. Since 2006 the group has had to deal with tensions arising from key events in the Middle East including the bombing of Lebanon and more recently the siege of Gaza. Due to personal

connections, the Muslim volunteers are enabled to get the perspective of the ‘other side’ and vice-versa. Locally the Palestine-Israel conflict becomes a political issue and less of a ‘Muslims vs Jews’ affair.

### **Key Challenges and Lessons Learnt**

1. Lack of support from the Muslim and Jewish communities and the impact of the Middle East conflict

As mentioned earlier, the two communities within the city of Bristol had never established a relationship with each other and for both sides the issue of the Middle East conflict was the basis for their opinions of each other. The individuals involved with setting up the organization Salaam Shalom and those who volunteered with the Radio Salaam Shalom project came under pressure from their respective communities. It was seen as fraternizing with the enemy instead of an opportunity to have meaningful dialogue.

In addition, when the bombing of Lebanon took place in the summer of 2006, the chair of Salaam Shalom, who was married to a Lebanese national, vacated his position as chair in protest. Whilst his decision was respected and also understood as he was under immense family pressure, the rest of the Muslim board members stayed on nonetheless. This was a test of commitment and if the others had quit at this first major hurdle, then there would have been no point in pursuing dialogue.

When the siege of Gaza took place in the winter of 2008, one of the Muslim board members who had his own weekly column in the local paper wrote a series of opinion pieces reflecting his personal views on the conflict. Some of the Jewish members felt that he had been excessively harsh in his criticism of the Israeli government and had a discussion with him on this matter. Although the discussion did not result in a softening of his stance, it demonstrated the maturity of the relationship that had developed as the tension that arose did not have an adverse effect on the board or the project.

All this could have potentially ended any form of positive dialogue. However, the key lesson to note is that it is important for those involved to have the determination to engage with one another regardless of external events beyond their control. Involvement with a project of this nature is not guarantee that participants will change their views or stance, but its strength is in the ability of individuals to keep talking even when passions are high and there is strong disagreement on a particular matter.

## 2. Finding a Suitable Station Manager

Due to the unique nature of Radio Salaam Shalom, recruiting the station manager was critical and a major challenge for the board. It was not as simple case as finding someone who was able to handle the technical aspects of the job; the candidate was required to understand the delicate nature of Muslim-Jewish dialogue and the tensions that come with it.

## 3. Funding

Funding is always a major issue for charities. The project has had problems in securing funding over the last 18 months. This is due to the fact that it tends not to fit neatly into the traditional funding streams. It is a local organization but local funders are not keen to support it as a large portion of the beneficiaries i.e. listeners are not local, and international funders tend to fund large established charities who have a physical international presence, unlike a small local internet based project such as Radio Salaam Shalom. However, this has not deterred the board or the volunteers. In light of reduced resources station output was adapted to broadcasting podcasts instead of the previous large volume of live programming and volunteers took on many of the station manager duties and responsibilities with the paid role becoming a part-time position whilst the board focused on securing funding. Income generation ideas were also developed and Salaam Shalom as an organization was able to offer media and broadcast services and training to the local authority and groups for a fee.

When the idea was first brought to the attention of the two faith communities, the naysayers said it would never work. When Salaam Shalom was set up and the radio station project was launched, the same people said it would never last. However, the project is still going, a grassroots project with a global impact that is running from one of the most deprived wards within the city of Bristol.

## Conclusion

Both the organizations and their projects highlighted in this paper have been recognised as exemplars in their particular fields not just by their peers, but also by outside observers. What these two have in common is that they are both grassroots initiatives.

The impact that they have had on their local communities and beneficiaries to date are all the more significant as they have emerged from within the local population as opposed to being something artificially created by governments or authorities.

The individuals involved with both initiatives are people who are self-motivated and did not need outside bodies to give them the 'push' or 'drive' to take part. Their involvement has been proactive in nature and they have been driving the agenda forward from the very beginning.

The two organizations had their origins in informal activities that took place without funding and once they organised themselves into a more formal structure, they managed to secure financial resources and began expanding organically. It is interesting to note that due to this, even when funding began to dry-up, the motivation still remained and they demonstrated their adaptability, allowing them to continue to do what they could with less or in some cases with no financial resources.

These positive dialogues, initiated as a result of local and global conflicts, were unusual in the sense that they attracted some media attention. Given the nature and timing of these initiatives it is disappointing that such attention was not given more prominence. The media have a significant effect on the perceptions of their audience and despite assertions that they act responsibly and balanced in their reporting, there have been too many instances where conflicts and tension between faith minorities and between minorities and the majority have been sensationalised. With many ordinary people holding the media accountable for inflating tension, journalism just like banking and politics is a profession that is not widely held in high regard. Faith minorities who have felt that they have been misrepresented in mainstream media have almost chosen to disengage further compounding the problem as only the most vociferous and extreme elements are willing to provide soundbites. The creation of alternative media such as Radio Salaam Shalom is an attempt to break this vicious cycle.

The prevailing international narrative is that people of different faiths and nationalities do not get on, Muslims including those residing here hate the West, Jews hate Muslims etc. Initiatives such as Interfaith Swansea and Salaam Shalom are attempting to change the narrative by enabling those involved to represent themselves to those outside of their communities and to bridge the divide between them and communities with whom they are in conflict.

## References

- BBC Website. (last updated 2008). *Special Report: 7 July Bombings*, [online]  
Available: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/uk/05/london\\_blasts/what\\_happened/html/default.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/uk/05/london_blasts/what_happened/html/default.stm) [9th October 2009]
- Daily Mail. (2007). *Radio Station Run by Muslims and Jews Launched* [online]  
Available: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-433116/Radio-station-run-Jews-Muslims-launched.html> [9th October 2009]
- Harris, P. (2001). Hindu and Sikh Extremists in Link with the BNP, *The Observer* 23 December
- Interfaith Network UK. (2007). *20 Years: Milestones on the Journey Together Towards Greater Interfaith Understanding and Cooperation* England: Interfaith Network UK
- Interfaith Network UK. (1993, 2005). *Building Good Relations: Code of Conduct* England: Interfaith Network UK
- Islamic Human Rights Commission. (2002). *The Hidden Victims of September 11: The Backlash against the Muslims in the UK*, England: IHRC
- Media4Diversity. (2009). Taking the Pulse of Diversity in Media [online]  
Available: <http://www.media4diversity.eu/en/content/radio-salaam-shalom> [9th October 2009]
- Moore, K., Mason, P., and Lewis, J. (2008). *Images of Islam in the UK: The Representation of British Muslims in the National Print News Media 2000-2008* Cardiff: Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies
- Muslim Council of Britain. (2005). *Signed Ulama Statement* [online]  
Available: [http://www.mcb.org.uk/uploads/Signed\\_Ulama\\_statement.pdf](http://www.mcb.org.uk/uploads/Signed_Ulama_statement.pdf) [1st October 2009]
- Office of National Statistics Website (2003) *Religion in the UK*, [online]  
Available: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=293> [9th October 2009]
- Socialist Party. (2005). *Socialism Today Issue 95: Under Siege: Muslims in Britain* [online]  
Available: <http://www.socialismtoday.org/95/muslims.html> [1st October 2009]
- Sustainable Swansea *Green Maps*  
Available:  
[http://sustainableswansea.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=63&Itemid=93](http://sustainableswansea.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=63&Itemid=93) [29th September 2009]

**Cultural and religious dialogue:  
A legacy of religious art**

Judith E. Dietz  
Art Gallery of Nova Scotia

**Abstract:** The exhibition, *An Expression of Faith: Sacred Art of Centuries Past*, first displayed at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in 1998 illustrates the positive effects of mutual co-operation between the cultural, religious and civic communities in preserving our religious and cultural heritage. The exhibition featured a select group of European sculptures from the Renaissance period donated by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Halifax. The history and preservation of the three featured sculptures from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries will be revealed - from their installation in the Chapel Built in a Day in Halifax, to their removal and long-term conservation in Ottawa, and finally to their eventual return and public display.

**Key words:** *religious art, culture, religious dialogue, Nova Scotia, heritage*

**Résumé :** L'exposition « Une expression de la foi : L'Art du Sacré du siècle passé », présentée d'abord à l'Art Gallery de la Nouvelle-Écosse en 1998, illustre les effets positifs de la coopération entre les communautés culturelles, religieuses et civiques dans la préservation de notre patrimoine religieux et culturel. L'exposition a montré un nombre de sculptures européennes de la Renaissance offert par l'archevêché catholique de Halifax. L'histoire et la préservation de trois sculptures vedettes depuis la fin du quinzième et début du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle seront dévoilées, depuis leur installation dans la Chapelle Construite dans une Journée à Halifax, de leur conservation à long terme à Ottawa et, finalement, leur retour éventuel pour être affiché publiquement.

**Mots clés :** *art religieux, culture, dialogue religieux, Nouvelle-Écosse, patrimoine*

As the former Manager of Collections and Gallery Services at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, (a provincial government institution under the Department of Tourism, Culture and Heritage) communications and public relations played a pivotal role in my professional association with donors to the Gallery's Permanent Collection. However, for me, the most memorable donation was the acquisition of a rare collection of religious sculptures and the subsequent installation of the exhibition, *An Expression of Faith: Sacred Art of Centuries Past*. Cultural and religious dialogue played a key role and was instrumental in forging a strategic partnership between the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Halifax, the Provincial Government of Nova Scotia and the Federal Government of Canada. On-going communication and co-operation, over a period of several years, ensured the eventual success of the project and multiple re-installations of the exhibition and presentations of related public programs.

The history behind this fascinating story, one that may also be considered an example of communications and collaboration, began with the first Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Halifax, Bishop William Walsh. One of the most notable projects undertaken by Bishop William Walsh was the 1843 opening of Holy Cross Cemetery and the construction of the Chapel of Our Lady of Sorrows, more commonly known as the "Chapel Built in a Day".

On July 26, 1843 a group of volunteers, including Clerics, politicians, bankers, merchants, tradesmen and labourers, predominantly of Irish descent, gathered in the south end of Halifax in response to the Bishop's plea to clear the ground, erect a fence, lay out walks, build a bridge and prepare a foundation in preparation for the construction of a chapel. On August 31<sup>st</sup> in an extraordinary feat of organization and skill, nearly two thousand volunteer workers raised and roofed a Gothic chapel, 55 feet long and 25 feet wide, all in one day. As the daily newspaper, *The Register* reported on September 7<sup>th</sup>, 1843, it was indeed "the miracle of the day".

Upon completion the Chapel's interior featured a collection of 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century European carvings, as well as a stained glass window containing fragments presumed to have been acquired by the Bishop during his travels in Europe in the 1840's. Three of the sculptures, scenes

from the *Passion of Christ*, now in the Gallery's collection and featured in the *Expression of Faith* exhibition are the originals that were installed in the Chapel after its construction.

In the late 1970's, a visitor to the Chapel, who unbeknownst to me at that time was my late father Robert Dietz, noticed the fragile condition and extreme state of deterioration of the wooden carvings. He approached the archdiocese administrator to advocate for their care and attention and recommended that professionals in the field look them at. As a result, the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI- a federal government institution under the Department of Canadian Heritage), was contacted for advice and recommendations. Following preliminary examination, the sculptures were removed from the Chapel in 1980 and transported to Ottawa. Further research and assessment deemed the sculptures to be of such artistic and historic merit that CCI agreed to accept this major project.

Examination of the individual sculptures was undertaken using a variety of analytical and photographic techniques revealing the presence of multiple layers of polychrome, or coloured paint, below numerous layers of white over-paint. These layers of white over-paint were removed down to the most complete underlying colored layer as determined by chemical and instrumental analysis. This unveiling, particularly on the Crucifixion, indicated the remarkable mastery the unknown artist brought to the sculpture's creation.

The restoration of the three-featured sculptures, *Christ Bearing the Cross*, *The Crucifixion* and *The Lamentation* was undertaken by the Canadian Conservation Institute, at no cost. For more than 15 years the sculptures underwent extensive treatment and restoration involving 21 conservators and scientists and approximately 9,000 hours of labor – the longest project ever undertaken by the Fine Arts lab at CCI to date.

Due to their historical and artistic significance and in order to ensure their preservation, CCI recommended that upon completion, the sculptures be donated to a public institution with both adequate climate control and security. At a time when many religious congregations lacked resources and were stretched to their limits financially, the Archdiocese of Halifax recognized that maintaining the sculptures in a secure environment was beyond their means, as the Chapel Built in a Day, officially used only once a year on September 15<sup>th</sup> in celebration of the "*Feast of*



*Our Lady of Sorrows*, was without proper controls and consequently opened to environmental fluctuations and vandalism. As a result, the Archdiocese upon the recommendation of the Nova Scotia Museum opted to donate the sculptures to the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. Fibre-glass replicas were made of the wooden sculptures by CCI and installed in the Chapel where the originals once stood.

The sculptures were delivered to the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia in the fall of 1996. Upon opening the crates, the spiritual nature and intrinsic beauty of the carvings had a profound influence on me. The significance of these artworks immediately necessitated further research and the motivation to mount a special exhibition of religious art, in an environment conducive to their religious and historical importance. When the preliminary concept for such an exhibition was discussed with the clergy and staff of the Archdiocese, there was immediate interest and enthusiastic support.

During this time-period, the original home of the Archbishop of Halifax, known as *Villa Maria*, was in the process of being sold for eventual demolition. Hearing of the possibility that other wooden carvings had been tucked away and, as time was of the essence, staff of the Archdiocese office decided to do a thorough inspection of the attic. As it was relayed to me, “following some strategic poking and prodding,” an additional collection of wooden objects was found, some in multiple pieces and in various conditions. Again, recognizing the limitations of their fiscal environment and the need for restoration of these newfound treasures, the Archdiocese contacted me. Following consultation and discussions regarding the cultural and religious significance of the collection and my formal plans for their eventual display, this second collection comprising 28 Gothic sculptures was donated to the Art Gallery in the fall of 1997.

With this additional collection in place, the theme of the *Life and Passion of Christ* was more or less complete and my plans for the exhibition, *An Expression of Faith: Sacred Art of Centuries Past*, finalized. However, the installation required specialized display elements not readily available and could not be produced as I had envisioned without designated funding, not only for the exhibition but the accompanying exhibition catalogue and public programs, all of which I felt was important to enhance the collection, expand its public profile, acknowledge the work of the conservators and the generosity of the donors and supporters.

Primary support for the *Expression of Faith* exhibition came from a former member of the Nova Scotia Legislature, the late Honourable Terrence Donahoe, Q.C. and members of his immediate family. Mr. Donahoe acted as liaison in many areas with the Archdiocese and the provincial government and facilitated a major gift from the Patrick Power Estate, for which he was one of the executors. With his assistance and that of Archbishop Austin E. Burke, contributions were solicited through personal letters and the weekly Church bulletins from the Archdiocese. In addition, although one-on-one personal solicitations resulted in several significant individual and corporate donations, overwhelmingly, over fifty smaller donations were received from friends, gallery volunteers, parishioners and others who expressed interest in supporting this unique collection and exhibition.

The donations were used for the production of a 24 pages exhibition catalogue, the construction of period display elements and three major public programming events based on the exhibition. The installation recreated a small chapel environment and included the production of a 9-foot stained glass window, an authentic replica in the medieval Gothic style, as well as sculpture mounts and stands for each of the sculptures, refurbishment of a communion rail used not only to enhance the environment, but also as security for the artworks to prevent touching.

The official AGNS exhibition opening took place on May 28, 1998 and included representation by all stakeholders. The formal invitation was extended by the AGNS Chair of the Board of Governors, Fred Fountain; AGNS Director, Bernard Riordon; and Msgr. Martin Currie, Diocesan Administrator, Archdiocese of Halifax. Archbishops Emeritus, Austin E. Burke and James M. Hayes were in attendance, as well as numerous members of the clergy including priests from the Archdiocese and nuns from the Convent of the Sacred Heart and the Sisters of Charity. Government representatives included: Peter Delefos the Member of the Nova Scotia Legislature for Halifax Citadel; the Honourable Terrence Donahoe, former cabinet minister; his brother, Art Donahoe, former Speaker of the House; their father, Senator Richard Donahoe, former Mayor of Halifax, provincial cabinet minister, Attorney General and Senator; the Honourable John Savage, former Premier of Nova Scotia and the Honourable Alan Abraham, former Lt. Governor of Nova Scotia, among others. Additional guests included representatives from the Nova Scotia Museum and the university communities, including Saint Mary's, Dalhousie, King's College, Mount Saint Vincent and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design,

as well as members of the AGNS Board of Governors, regular Gallery members, staff and volunteers.

In addition to the official exhibition opening, three public educational programs were organized in conjunction with the display. Robert Arnold, Chief Conservator from the Canadian Conservation Institute, who was responsible for the restoration of the sculptures and supervised the 15 years conservation project, presented a detailed slide lecture presentation of the history of the conservation work. Early music choral and instrumental groups, *Rejouissance* and *Incantatus* presented a concert of Renaissance and early Baroque music and finally an Ecclesiastical Treasures of Halifax Tour. The full-day bus tour program consisted of guided tours of four churches of different denominations; Saint George's, St. Patrick's, All Saints Cathedral and Saint Mary's Basilica, to view their unique ecclesiastical collections. The event concluded with a guided tour of the exhibition *An Expression of Faith: Sacred Art of Centuries Past* at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. Due to the resounding success of these programs, the lecture, concert and ecclesiastical tours were presented twice to accommodate the over-whelming public response.

On November 24, 1998, Peter Delefos the Member of the Legislature for Halifax Citadel passed a resolution in the Nova Scotia House of Assembly recognizing the quality of the exhibition and its artistic and religious significance, congratulating the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Halifax, the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia and patrons and benefactors.

Due to the popularity of the display, the exhibition *An Expression of Faith: Sacred Art of Centuries Past* was installed three times, most recently in 2007-2008 in celebration of a related project. The former Archbishop of Halifax, now Archbishop of Ottawa, the most Reverend Terrence Prendergast was a staunch supporter and promoter, both of the *Expression of Faith* Exhibition and the auxiliary research project - the discovery, study and identification of the illuminated manuscript, the *Salzennes Antiphonal*.

Similar to the *Expression of Faith* exhibition, partnership between religious, government and the university communities have been forged with my on-going work on the 16<sup>th</sup> century illuminated manuscript, the *Salzennes Antiphonal*. Again, similar to the three polychrome sculptures from the Chapel Built in a Day, the *Salzennes Antiphonal* was most likely acquired in the 1840s or 1850s

in France by Bishop William Walsh, the first Archbishop for the Archdiocese of Halifax. Also, similar to the second donation of sculptures from the Archdiocese of Halifax in 1997, it too was found in the attic of *Villa Maria*. However, as Chancellor of Saint Mary's University, Archbishop James M. Hayes donated the *Salzinnes Antiphonal* to the Patrick Power Library in celebration of the opening of the new library in 1975.

Originating from the Cistercian Abbey of Salzinnes in Namur, present day Belgium, the *Salzinnes Antiphonal* was commissioned by former cantrix and prioress Dame Julienne de Glymes in 1554-1555. In addition to the liturgical text and music for the Divine Office; the manuscript features a rare and unique collection of illuminations depicting multiple images of nuns together with their names in cursive script, three separate religious orders and patrons' coats-of-arms.

Originally catalogued as a 'Roman Catholic Antiphonary,' the illuminated manuscript was identified and documented in my thesis entitled, *Centuries of Silence: The Discovery of the Salzinnes Antiphonal*, completed at Saint Mary's University in 2006. As a result of extensive research in the Archives of Brussels and Namur in Belgium, the Irish Pontifical College in Rome and the Vatican Secret Archives, the *Salzinnes Antiphonal* has been attracting national and international interest and similar to the three polychrome sculptures, is currently under-going scientific and technical analysis prior to restoration at the Canadian Conservation Institute.

As the primary function of the Antiphonal was to celebrate the sung portions of the Divine Office, one of my main goals was to have the first public concert of the Antiphonal, in over 450 years, performed in Halifax at Saint Mary's Basilica. In conjunction with musicologist Jennifer Bain, cultural and religious dialogue played a key role in realizing this goal with the collaboration of Scotia Festival of Music, Saint Mary's University, Dalhousie University, the Archdiocese of Halifax and Saint Mary's Basilica. Donations from numerous private and corporate donors resulted in the premier presentation at the Basilica on October 27, 2007. It was performed to a standing room only crowd of over one thousand people by the renowned New York based early music choral ensemble, *Anonymous 4*. Since then, the concert has been performed by the Boston choral ensemble, *Cappella Clausura* in the Old South Church in Boston in 2008 and again in 2009. It is my eventual goal that once the Salzinnes Antiphonal is

restored by CCI that it will also become the focus of a special exhibition and similar to the *Expression of Faith* exhibition, will also include related public programming events.

In conclusion, the support and collaboration of a number of civic minded individuals and organizations with special interests in culture, history and religion culminated in a project which ultimately served all stakeholders and was important in guaranteeing the success of both the *Expression of Faith* exhibition, and the *Salzannes Antiphonal* project. Besides regular media coverage for the exhibition, strategic initiatives due to the participation by all stakeholders played a fundamental role in promoting the various related educational, cultural and religious events to new audiences. In addition to regular articles in the quarterly publication, the *AGNS Journal and Calendar*; notices about programming events and personal letters from the Archbishop in the weekly Church Bulletin, served to expand visitorship. Daily public and school tours were provided by Gallery docents and as the exhibition's Curator, in-depth tours were provided by request. Public response to the exhibition was overwhelmingly positive as demonstrated by some insightful comments written in our *Talk Back* book, which offered visitor's an opportunity for reflection and response.

The donation and exhibition served to provide many new opportunities and many 'firsts' for the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. The donation from the Archdiocese of Halifax marked the first acquisition of a major collection of religious sculptures celebrating its religious heritage. The *Expression of Faith* exhibition was the first to be presented in a unique setting and the first from the Permanent Collection to receive designated private and corporate donations. It was also the first exhibition to generate public programming events to include a period concert and an ecclesiastical tour, building new frontiers within the religious and cultural communities and providing our regular visitors with a new cultural experience.

Additionally, the Ecclesiastical Treasures Tour served to foster and enhance a better understanding of interfaith dialogue with the participation of different religious denominations. Another example of the profound influence of the exhibition and interfaith dialogue was the generous donation of a rare 16<sup>th</sup> century Guilio Romano painting, entitled, *Madonna and Child with Saint John the Baptist*, by Dr. and Mrs. S.T. Laufer, members of the Jewish community, and the first ever loan of royal British ecclesiastical silver by St. Paul's Anglican church, the oldest Protestant Church in Canada. Both works were included with additional paintings from the

Gallery's Permanent Collection in the adjacent gallery to the *Expression of Faith* exhibition, as examples of other types of media created during the same time period.

Although the polychrome sculptures were a part of the cultural and religious history of the Chapel Built in a Day, the Archdiocese of Halifax had the foresight to recognize the importance in preserving the wooden carvings, entrusting them to the care of a public cultural institution. The on-going and long-term support of government and private donors in recognizing this vital part of our religious heritage was critical in ensuring that these cultural and ecclesiastical treasures are preserved for generations to come. Such initiatives continue today, for example, in the Holy Cross Cemetery Restoration Project, under the leadership of members of The Charitable Irish Society of Halifax and The Irish Association of Nova Scotia. Ultimately, the role of cultural and religious dialogue was instrumental in the successful outcome and resulted in this legacy of religious art for the people of Nova Scotia.

## Media and religion in Quebec's recent debates

Solange Lefebvre

Université de Montréal

Jennifer Guyver

Doctoral student, McGill University

**Abstract:** Our paper will be focused on the period starting in 2000, when the relationship between the media and the religious question became highly polarized. If Islam is the main victim of this polarization since September 2001, the situation nevertheless goes beyond that particular issue. We will present an analysis of the first part of the Bouchard-Taylor report which concludes the inadequate treatment of the news media regarding consensual adjustments and reasonable accommodations of a religious nature in Quebec. More recently, Catholicism and its representatives were faced with similar divisions. Pope Benedict XVI statements and various bishops' declarations have thrown Catholicism in a media ground of a rare intensity. The issues of debates were related to abortion, HIV/AIDS and the revisionism (of the Holocaust). Catholic authorities certainly questioned their use of the media in a context where op-ed oriented journalism frequently replaced a more analytical approach of current affairs related to religion. In this regard, it seems that religious orthodoxy is facing harsh criticism nourished by a kind of religious post-modernity and the prevailing "weakness of faith" in society. Furthermore, the media intervention has become so complex and so demanding that even an experienced institution as Catholicism can barely prevent its drawbacks. How long will religions resist such criticism of religious convictions?

**Key words:** *Bouchard-Taylor report, media, religion, post-modernity*

**Résumé :** Notre papier portera sur la période des années 2000, alors que la relation entre les médias et la question religieuse s'est grandement polarisée. Si l'Islam paraît la principale victime de cette polarisation depuis septembre 2001, il faut néanmoins aller plus loin. Nous offrirons une analyse de la première partie du rapport Bouchard-Taylor, qui conclut au traitement inadéquat de la nouvelle par les médias, concernant les ajustements concertés et les accommodements raisonnables de nature religieuse au Québec. Plus récemment, le catholicisme et ses représentants furent aux prises avec des polarisations similaires. Le pape Benoît XVI et diverses déclarations d'évêques ont jeté le catholicisme dans une arène médiatique et publique d'une rare véhémence. Les questions soulevées concernaient l'avortement, le sida et le négationnisme. Si les

autorités catholiques se sont alors interrogées sur leur usage des médias, il faut aussi reconnaître que le journalisme d'opinion a occupé une large place, parfois au détriment du journalisme analytique. À ce sujet, il semble d'une part que l'orthodoxie religieuse soit mise à mal présentement, en lien avec la postmodernité religieuse et la faiblesse du croire qu'elle implique. D'autre part, la médiation médiatique est devenue si complexe et si exigeante que même une institution expérimentée comme l'est le catholicisme, a peine à déjouer ses pièges. Jusqu'où les religions résisteront-elles à une telle critique des religions?

**Mots clés :** *Rapport Bouchard-Taylor, médias, religion, post-modernité*



## **Introduction**

The concept of law in Canada and Quebec is strongly influenced by liberal, Anglo-Saxon philosophy, which prioritizes the rights and freedoms of individuals. However, the present flurry of public opinion with regards to religion, suggests that other factors are shaping the prevailing sentiment in Quebec. In this discussion we will focus on the effects of one factor in particular: the socio-religious, centralist culture rooted in Catholicism, which stresses the uniformity of religious practices and carries a certain perception of « visibility » and religious affirmation<sup>1</sup>. We will examine the origins of this culture, its effects on the language used to describe religious minorities seeking accommodation in public discourse and the representation of visible religious minorities during the 2007 Bouchard-Taylor Commission on Accommodation Practices Relating to Cultural Differences. The findings presented in this paper are part of an ongoing SSHRC funded research project lead by Solange Lefebvre and Lori Beaman analyzing the 2007 Bouchard-Taylor Commission and the 1999 Proulx Commission.

The common use of these terms in Quebec<sup>2</sup> to describe individuals seeking accommodation, specifically members of visible religious minorities, reveals the widespread, negative perception of public affirmations of religion, which stems from the uniform, centralist, Catholic culture that defines Francophone Quebec. The terms “orthodox,” “radical,” “extremist,” “fundamentalist” and “fanatic” are often used interchangeably, without qualification, in both the media and general discussion. Each of these terms, however, have distinct meanings, and some are associated with violent attitudes and behaviors.

The news media’s representation of accommodation during and leading up to the 2007 Bouchard-Taylor Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences further reveals the effects of Quebec’s socio-religious heritage. In French-language Quebec newspapers, visible religious minorities seeking accommodation for their religious practices are portrayed, implicitly and explicitly as rejectionists of modernity and Quebec values and culture. In the English language newspaper, *The Gazette*, however, the portrayal of individuals seeking accommodation lacks negative

qualifications and accommodation is presented as an issue relating exclusively to minority rights. The difference between the English and French language newspapers representation of visible religious minorities suggests a difference in cultural attitudes towards individuals expressing visible affirmations of religion.

### **The socio-religious context of Quebec**

The socio-religious history of Quebec and Quebec media have been strongly shaped by its distinctly roman-Catholic, socio-religious, quite uniform culture. The origins of this culture may be traced to two factors: one is the critique of public religious practices expressed in early evangelical Christian texts, and the other is the influence of catholic social movements in the 19th century.

Following in the tradition of prophetic Judaism, Christianity is the source of a strong criticism of religion against practices tainted by superficiality or begetting of iniquity. Jesus minimized the importance of divine commandments that had such effects on religious practice, and reconceived of divine law as directed towards the fostering of love for God and humanity, and respect for justice.

Under the influence of the New Testament, personal faith in God and love for ones neighbours rose within Western Christian framework to occupy a place of central importance: "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" writes Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:1.<sup>3</sup> The emphasis on justice and love far surpasses that of outward religious practice, such that public displays, or manifestations, of personal religious convictions are often negatively perceived as sanctimonious acts. Major principles concerning the necessity of heart-felt sincerity are present in many prominent religious traditions, and Christianity invokes a radical expression of this idea. A saying attributed to Jesus says,

"And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. " <sup>4</sup>

The significance of justice and love has intensified in Christianity over time. On the one hand, this intensification may be attributed, in part, to the Protestant critique of a mediated relationship between God and human beings; a theological interpretation that elevated the value of personal readings of the Bible, supplanting the hegemony of tradition and dogma. On the other hand, since the inception of Marxism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, various Christian movements have sought to apply Christian ethics in socio-political struggles for justice.

These critiques of religion have had a powerful affect in Quebec, where the promotion of justice and worldly engagement as the central mission of all Christians by Catholic Action encounters a call for religious discretion<sup>5</sup>. Even after the quiet revolution, labour unions and communities are still imbued with a « leftists » Christian spirit, blended with different ideological movements, such as neo-marxism and social-democracy. The Catholic Church's control over the familial and social aspects of daily life encouraged the development of more inward, intimate and private forms of religiosity. As love for humanity was embraced as the essential dimension of faith, the importance of ritual practices and religious obligations became increasingly secondary.

Despite a certain decline of religion in Quebec, notably manifested by decreasing community participation and the loss of traditional religious vocations, but a relative stability regarding the “rite de passage” of baptism<sup>6</sup>, the religious imaginary of Quebec Catholics of French descent is none-the-less severely marked by these dimensions. Every public expression of religion that contrasts with the norm is now viewed as suspect. This mistrust has entered common language, such that, within the media and casual conversations, minority, orthodox religious attitudes are described as radical, extremist, fundamentalist (or *intégriste*), and fanatical. Of course, we have to take into account the global context where religion is often associated with fanaticism, especially since 2001. We will examine more closely the meaning of these qualifications that are used interchangeably within the media and the public forum.

### **Descriptions of individuals requesting accommodation of a religious nature**

The language used to describe individuals who request accommodations of a religious nature in the Quebec media is not always appropriate. A person who requests accommodation, or seeks legal recourse, for religious purposes may be described as radical, extreme, or even fanatical, regardless of the nature of their request. These terms, however, have discrete and associated meanings that are not interchangeable and deserve close consideration.

The term radical comes from the Latin term *radix*, or root, which refers to the essence, and the origins of a thing. More recently, the word radical is associated with a person who focuses on the source of a problem, the effects of which they wish to change. The political meaning of the term originated in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and has been attached to republicans, partisans of democratic or secular reform, as well as, leftist, radical-socialists. Accordingly, radicalism is not necessarily negative, and signifies unconditional, uncompromised, engagement.

Extremism refers to the act of pushing a doctrine to its furthest limits, eliciting extreme consequences. Etymologically, the latin *ex* may signify the notion of completion. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the superlative *extremus* indicated the “the outermost”, extreme, from which the word *extremitas* derives; as well as the terms *extremist* and *extremism* in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Mark Juergensmeyer proposes that religious extremism is not necessarily violent but can become so when it endorses aggression or war, for diverse reasons<sup>7</sup>. Rigal-Cellard characterizes religious attitudes as extreme when they pose a great risk, requiring as much as the sacrifice of one’s life, as with the case of martyr missionaries during the colonization of the New World<sup>8</sup>. According to Rigal-Cellard, fanaticism defines attitudes that advocate the use violence against others. An examination of “fanaticism” reveals that the term is etymologically associated with religion: *fanatum* means a consecrated space, or temple, from which arises the word *fanaticus*, which (in the 16<sup>th</sup> century) refers to a servant of the temple and (in the 17<sup>th</sup> century) means “inspired, frenzied”. The opposite of fanaticism is *profanus*, which means “outside the

temple”. Additionally, *profanare* signifies the profane usage of a sacred object, and *profanatio* means sacrilege.

The term fanaticism may be explicitly associated with an uncontrollable and threatening religiosity, whereas some authors prefer the word extremism. Radicalism, on the other hand, represents an orthodox perspective pushed to its limits. In this sense, the majority of religious accommodation requests may be qualified as orthodox or radical. Canadian law considers requests for religious accommodation as related to orthodox religious sentiment. Let us consider the meaning of orthodoxy.

We mean by orthodoxy (*ortho* – meaning law and correct, and *doxa* meaning opinion) the norms established by a clergy or religious institution , as well as, the religious sentiment of voluntary conformity to these norms. In the Multani verdict, the Supreme Court of Canada defined orthodoxy by stating that “G and his father B are orthodox Sikhs. G believes that his religion requires him to wear a kirpan at all times; a kirpan is a religious object that resembles a dagger and must be made of metal. ”<sup>9</sup> In this statement, orthodox signifies the believers adherence to their religion’s precepts.

The adjective “orthodox” which is used to describe a religion, must also be examined. There is a difference between the orthodoxy of a religion, or the norms established by the mandated authority, a group of religious adherents characterized as “orthodox,” and an orthodox attitude. In the first case, an orthodoxy can be reformed, or adapted in response to new questions or conditions. The second case refers to a sub-group within a religious tradition that maintains their fidelity to the fundamental rules of the larger group, who they accused of having betrayed the spirit and letter of their founding dogma. Finally, in the third case, the orthodox attitude is defined as voluntary conformity to rules and principles.

Being religious is not the same as being orthodox. A person can be religious and claim belonging to a specific group, while keeping a distance from certain practices they view as less fundamental or essential. The religious orthodox conform as best they can to the

dogma of their tradition, in so far as it has been interpreted historically. On occasion, this term qualifies members of a religion that have resisted certain historical reforms of the original orthodoxy. These people are sometimes referred to as traditionalists; in other words, people who are attached to traditions or principles otherwise rejected by other members of their religion. For example, Conservative Judaism, which appeared in the 19th century, accused Orthodox Judaism of having presented itself as “‘eternal’ without acknowledging in the historical developments that, in reality, influenced the formation of its doctrines.”<sup>10</sup> The term traditionalist is used in other domains, be it political or academic, to refer to groups, or individuals, that have resisted certain changes and insist on the foundational, or original (either real or imagined) doctrine of the group.

In the Western Christian world, the practice of conforming to numerous obligatory religious rules has declined in the wake of a modernity characterized by the emancipation of the individual. Modern persons are loosely tied to tradition and institutions. What was once obligatory has become contingent and optional. Ironically, in modern societies, the religious orthodox are those who submit voluntarily, rather than obligatorily, to specific rules. The religious orthodox can thus be seen as modern in that they exercise a voluntary choice to go against mainstream social practices. However, whether this choice arises out of a sense of submission or of voluntary adhesion, in Quebec and other Western societies, the orthodox inevitably offends the dominant religious perspective, especially the catholic culture, which tolerates the difference between religious prescriptions and religious practice, and even recommends adapting religious norms to suit the social environment.

In addition to the Multani case, let us examine the written description of the facts of Amselem case (Syndicat Northcrest v. Amselem 2004):

The appellants A, B, K, and F, all Orthodox Jews, ... set up “succahs” on their balconies for the purposes of fulfilling the biblically mandated obligation of dwelling in such small enclosed temporary huts during the annual nine-day Jewish religious festival of Succot. The respondent requested their removal, claiming that the succahs violated the by-laws, which, *inter alia*, prohibited decorations, alterations and constructions on the balconies. None of the

appellants had read the declaration of co-ownership prior to purchasing or occupying their individual units. The respondent proposed to allow the appellants to set up a communal succah in the gardens. The appellants expressed their dissatisfaction with the proposed accommodation, explaining that a communal succah would not only cause extreme hardship with their religious observance, but would also be contrary to their personal religious beliefs, which, they claimed, called for the setting up of their own succahs on their own balconies.<sup>11</sup>

Here is a description, which illustrates both a religious orthodox attitude and a religious group that is characterized, as orthodox. We see that their religious orthodox attitude is defined by conformity to an obligation imposed by the Bible; whereas, to identify a group of Jews as orthodox is simply a question qualifying their demands as orthodox. They write : « Since the focus of the inquiry is not on what others view the claimant's religious obligations as being, but what the claimant views these personal religious "obligations" to be, it is inappropriate to require expert opinions. »<sup>12</sup> The Supreme Court, thus, introduces a conception of orthodoxy, which accords no importance to the orthodoxy of the group in question.

The examination of the two Supreme Court of Canada cases suggests that individuals who lodge claims of religious discrimination are most certainly individuals who hold orthodox, even radical, religious attitudes. Whereas, the usage of the terms extremism and fanaticism in relation to juridical demands for accommodation constitutes an abuse of language, because these terms relate to religiously inspired violent attitudes. Fanaticism must be taken seriously in this day and age, when fundamentalism can often lead to violent conflicts; however, one must prevent the conflation of all forms of religious expression with fanaticism. The two cases examined here involved pious, religiously orthodox individuals, who were ready to defy social rules to maintain their practices.

### **The Quebec newsmedia's portrayal of accommodation and the Bouchard-Taylor Commission**

The purpose of the news media is to transmit information about current events and opinions. The integrity of the news media is determined by the perceived level of objectivity or neutrality of this transmission. Newspapers offer editorials and opinion columns, in addition to news reports and analyses. The division between fact and opinion

is often blurred. Many newspaper contributors are not journalists, nor have they received specialized training in the media. The examples presented in this paper demonstrate the variety of individuals who regularly contribute to newspapers. It is interesting to note that individuals with academic backgrounds, including college professors and ex-Judges, whose opinions are highly valued in society, wrote many editorials discussed in this section.

The news media may stir up controversy over some issues; yet, they are not expected to become embroiled in public debates, such that they cease to represent the perspective of a witness, and become active parties in the debates, defending their own integrity and purpose. During the public hearings of the Bouchard-Taylor commission, which began in 2007, the news media in Quebec stepped out of its traditional role as a “voyeur” and commentator to represent itself as a distinct participant in the debate, and to defend the role of the media against attacks from residents in Quebec and the commissioners, Gerard Bouchard and Charles Taylor.

A comparison between the 2007 Bouchard-Taylor commission and the 1999 Proulx report on the *deconfessionalization* of Quebec schools, which also conducted public hearings, accepted written attestations from the public, and inflamed public sentiment, highlights the media’s active role in the debate over accommodation. The final report of the Bouchard-Taylor commission refers to the media 85 times. In contrast, the final Proulx report mentioned the media 4 times. Moreover, of the 806 attestations submitted to the Bouchard-Taylor commission the word “media” occurred 894 times. A large number of these references, and those in the Bouchard-Taylor report, were associated with negative opinions. In contrast, within the 237 attestations submitted to the Proulx Commission there were 49 references to the media, the majority of which were associated with neutral opinions.

Before the commission began, the media was already regarded by some as a source of conflict and tension over accommodation. Gerard Bouchard publically criticized the media’s representation of accommodation. His comments to *Le Devoir* in August 2007<sup>13</sup>



created an atmosphere of animosity within the press, which endured through the accommodation hearings.<sup>14</sup> The media widely reported that the commissioners directly blamed the editors, journalists, and programmers, for fabricating a virtual “crisis” of accommodation out of only a few minor events and notorious legal cases.<sup>15</sup> This accusation, however, is not representative of the commissioners’ final analysis of the media’s involvement in the accommodation crisis.

The Bouchard-Taylor commission engaged a panel of academic researchers to examine the media’s portrayal of specific examples of accommodation. The commissioners found that “in 15 of 21 cases, there was striking distortions between general public perceptions and the actual facts as we were able to reconstitute them.”<sup>16</sup> In the final report, the commissioners note that the media’s coverage of reasonable accommodation peaked just prior to the creation of the Commission. They propose that Quebecer’s ravenous appetite for stories related to accommodation was caused by pre-existing social tensions over the place of ethnic minorities in Quebec society.<sup>17</sup> The commissioners conclude that the media’s increased and inaccurate coverage of accommodation between 2006 and 2007 aroused latent fears and concerns in the public<sup>18</sup>; the media itself, however, was not the source of those concerns.<sup>19</sup>

The commissioners maintain that several, mostly social, factors in Quebec created an atmosphere of panic over accommodation. They write:

“The main reason that we are adopting this hypothesis is that the junction would surely not have been so easily achieved between the outbursts in discourse on accommodation and what happened simultaneously at the societal level ... It is the combination of problems inherent in both threads, favoured by media excesses, that tipped the balance.”<sup>20</sup>

Bouchard and Taylor attribute societal concerns over accommodation to recent social issues specific to Quebec, such as minority rights, globalization, and anxiety over identity.<sup>21</sup> In addition to these factors, we propose that the tensions over accommodation, specifically in terms of the media’s representation of individuals who request accommodation, is also rooted in Quebec’s uniform, centralist Catholic culture, which criticizes visible affirmations of religious conviction. This criticism is not directed

towards personal piety, or religious differences, as much as public displays of religious sincerity. Individuals, whose religious beliefs are inconsistent with an attitude of discretion that verges on secrecy, are viewed as cultural outsiders.

Dr. Jim McDonnell, the director for advocacy of SIGNIS (the world Catholic association for communication), explains that the secular media has difficulty time “assimilating” the notion of eternal truth. Religion is thus treated as just another cultural custom. This serves to undermine “the possibility of any religious values and beliefs being regarded as true and so subtly reducing religious faith to a matter of private taste and emotional inclination.”<sup>22</sup> The Quebec news media’s portrayal of individuals who request accommodation for religious purposes demonstrates this mistaken conflation between religion and culture. This conflation engenders the view that those who are orthodox when it comes to religion must also be traditionalist when it comes to culture.

We can observe two tendencies within the portrayal of individuals requesting accommodation and the Bouchard-Taylor commission by Quebec newspapers<sup>23</sup>, between January 2007 and January 2009, that demonstrates Dr. McDonnell’s thesis: the first is the tendency to portray these individuals’ beliefs as incompatible with modernity; and the second is to portray these individuals as rejectionists of Quebec’s cultural values, such as equality between men and women.

In an opinion article published on August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2007, in *Le Devoir*, titled “Conserver sa culture laïque”, author Mathieu Saidon, a student at McGill University, declares that “la totalité des accommodements litigieux qui nous sont présentés est imputable au fanatisme religieux” and states that “Les religions sont sans pitié: elles exploitent les faiblesses humaines et, armées de leur tissu de mensonges, aspirent les poissons dans un gouffre d’illusions. Elles nous éloignent de la vérité; nous privent du savoir.”<sup>24</sup> Saidon asserts that religion is opposed to scientific progress, and that accommodation of religious practices will impede Quebec’s cultural advancement. He dismisses all accommodation requests for religious purposes because they come from fanatics.

Similarly, Kevin Henley, a professor of history at college Maisonneuve declares in the article “Gare au racisme ‘raisonnable’” published in *La Presse* September 16<sup>th</sup> 2007 : “Ce sont des fanatiques de tout acabit qui sont à l’origine de tous les débordements récents, allant au terrorisme [...] jusqu’aux irritants relativement anodins”

Henley equates accommodation with an unwillingness to embrace modernity, stating that “En réalité, plusieurs minorités religieuses et idéologiques, d’origine occidentale et même autochtone, n’en déplaise à la rectitude politique, pratiquent le même refus de la modernité.”<sup>25</sup> He argues that the current emphasis on immigrants amounts to racism, as it presupposes that immigrants cannot embrace modernity.

Marc Simard, an historian and professor at Collège François-Xavier-Garneau, similarly writes in *Le Soleil* that “Les faits qui sont venus troubler la conscience de nombre de Québécois, ces derniers mois, proviennent des demandes d’accommodement ou de ‘bon voisinage’ effectuées par la frange fondamentaliste des pratiquants de religions minoritaires (sikhs, hassidiques, musulmans, etc.), le plus souvent introduits ici par l’immigration récente.” He explains that Quebecers negative perception of religious minorities originates from a fear that the separation between Church and state is narrowing. He writes : “ils perçoivent ... ces revendications comme un retour de la religion par la porte arrière, au moyen de demandes d’accommodation qu’ils jugent archaïques ou même retrogrades (la voile, le kirpan, les salles de prières, les congés particuliers et la ségrégation des sexes, pour ne nommer que ceux-là).” Simard proposes that it is best for Quebec if religious minorities keep their antiquated religious practices private and religious symbols are prohibited in public institutions, in order to reaffirm the equality of all citizens.<sup>26</sup>

Evidently, Saidon, Henly, and Simard advocate for radical secularist perspectives that deny the legitimacy of most requests for reasonable accommodation; however, the idea that visible affirmations of religion are incompatible with modernity occurs implicitly in the media as well. In the December 2008, Magazine *l’Actualité* a Quebec journalist travels to India only to find that turbans are going out of fashion in the Sikh community in favor of “an attitude of discretion”. He writes: “Cette coiffure semble avoir quelque

chose de tout simplement démodé aux yeux de bien des jeunes sikhs” and he wonders if “le turban connaîtra un jour le sort de la ceinture fléchée, du béret ou des castagnettes [...] condamné au folklore.”<sup>27</sup> Journalist Michel Arseneault interviews many Sikhs who have abandoned wearing the turban, and explains their interpretation of the turban, yet he interviews few who do wear the turban, besides the taxi driver who brings him to the airport when he finally leaves India. Arseneault presents the factors surrounding the decline in turban wearing as exclusively modern, overlooking the history of the practice amongst Sikhs in India and the syncretism of Indian religions that permits individuals to identify strongly with more than one religious tradition and to blend practices to suit their situation. Arseneault’s concluding remarks, which equate the Sikh turban with antiquated articles of fashion that are void of religious symbolism, moreover demonstrates Dr. McDonnell’s argument that the secular media is unable to address religious practices as anything other than cultural customs or private tastes. Arseneault also suggests that Sikhs are abandoning turbans in an effort to better integrate into mainstream Indian society. His understanding of the Indian context is highly influenced by a Quebec perspective that views religious minorities as cultural outsiders. This perspective is evident in the analysis of the Bouchard-Taylor Commission.

Most media sources covering the Bouchard-Taylor commission identified the social-integration of minorities as the primary issue in the debate, suggesting that people who visibly affirm their religious convictions are not properly integrated into mainstream society and that they do not hold the same fundamental values as Quebecers, most notably equality between men and women.<sup>28</sup> This latter point was made by an ex-Supreme Court judge, Claire L’Heureux-Dubé in an article printed November 9, 2007 in *Le Devoir*. Citing the Multani verdict as an error in judgment, the ex-judge stated that

“Tout accommodement n’est pas raisonnable. Intervient la notion d’égalité très présente dans le débat, une valeur sine qua non de la société québécoise et canadienne, particulièrement lorsqu’il s’agit d’égalité entre hommes et femmes [...] De la liberté religieuse à l’extrémisme religieux, il n’y a parfois qu’un pas.”<sup>29</sup>

In the month following L’Heureux-Dubé’s comments, the Quebec Conseil du Statut de la Femme released a report recommending modifying the *Chartes québécoise des droits et libertés de la personne* to privilege equality between men and women before freedom of religion.<sup>30</sup> Both L’Heureux-Dubé and the Conseil du Statut de la Femme interpreted accommodation of religion as a threat to gender equality.

There is indeed awareness within the media and in Quebec at large that the perception of religious minorities as cultural outsiders is not a universal truth. To balance this radical perception of orthodox religious groups the presses often swing dramatically in the other direction – focusing on the cultural assimilation of various minorities. The articles published in *La Presse* and *Le Devoir* during the public hearings of the Bouchard-Taylor commission frequently offer “portraits” of the various religious groups – most often Muslims, Sikhs, and Jews – at the center of the accommodation debate. These portraits attempt to reconcile stereotypes with reality, though few succeed in portraying members of these groups as legitimate members and participants in Quebec society and culture.

In a series of articles, which debuted November 26, 2007, journalist Patrick Lagacé set out to investigate the real Muslim community of Montreal. Lagacé’s methodology involved avoiding spokespersons for the community, imams, and bearded, tunic wearing Muslims. His interview subjects were identified as belonging to the “real world” by their mundane concerns to do with road conditions, healthcare, hockey, and entertainment.<sup>31</sup> Despite Lagacé’s attempts to offer an authentic portrait of the Montreal Muslim community, his narrative is plagued with reminders of the most radical stereotypes of Muslims as violent, terrorist, misogynists, and his interview questions keep the conversation centered on this picture.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, Lagacé’s subjects continuously struggle to have the journalist recognize them as Quebecers, bringing up their own sense of belonging to Quebec society and association with Quebec culture. In contrast to the media’s attentive depiction of Sikhs, Jews, and Muslims, the portraits of Jehovah’s Witnesses or Protestant Christian denominations, who frequently request accommodation for religious practices, are altogether absent in the media. This absence

further reinforces the perception of accommodation as a problem created solely by visible religious minorities.

The English Montreal newspaper, the *Gazette*, presented accommodation as problematic only for Francophone Quebecers, who were largely characterized as xenophobic, bigoted, and anti-immigrant.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, Anglophones were portrayed as unwaveringly supportive of religious minorities and accommodation practices. The *Gazette* assumed an etic perspective, suggesting simultaneously that Anglophones were not directly affected by the accommodation of religious minorities and were being unfairly excluded from the conversation over accommodation.<sup>34</sup>

In the article “Anglos don’t seem to understand accommodation crisis”, columnist Don Macpherson writes that at the only English hearing of the Bouchard-Taylor commission:

“Almost everybody at the forum was a member of at least one kind of minority in Quebec. They feel vulnerable in the face of the hostility towards minorities on the part of some members of the white, French-speaking majority. They yearn for reconciliation among the communities ... the mood at the forum could be expressed in the questions: Why can’t we all get along? An ‘accommodation problem? What accommodation problem.’”<sup>35</sup>

Macpherson focuses on the minority status of religious groups to explain the tension surrounding accommodation in Quebec society. He suggests that accommodation is only perceived as a problem in areas where there are few minority groups, and presents the debate as having little, or nothing, to do with religion.

Articles printed in the *Gazette* about accommodation subtly, yet consistently, represent accommodation, and the Bouchard-Taylor commission, as related exclusively to the place of minorities in Quebec society. On several occasions, the Bouchard-Taylor commission was referred to as the commission on the “accommodation of minorities”<sup>36</sup>, as opposed to the designation of the commission “on the accommodation of cultural differences”. The *Gazette* also invited readers to give their opinion on whether commissioners “go far enough in addressing concerns about the state of minorities in Quebec?”<sup>37</sup> Framing the debate as a minority issue, as opposed to an issue related to cultural differences, suggests that all minorities have a stake in the debate, and further implies that those who question

accommodation practices must oppose minority rights. The Gazette's singular representation of the Bouchard-Taylor commission as a public debate over the rights of minorities overlooks other important social issues discussed related to accommodation – such as the role of the courts in determining accommodation practices, the meaning of secularism and interculturalism, and the problems of poverty and unemployment.<sup>38</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The Gazette is the only English language newspaper in Quebec, and is a vocal proponent of securing greater rights for Anglophones, a culturally and religiously diverse population with British Protestant roots. Despite the Gazette's polarizing portrayal of Anglophone and Francophone opinions on accommodation, the terms extremist, fanatic, or fundamentalist, have rarely been used to describe individuals seeking accommodation of a religious nature. Moreover, the Gazette qualifies practices of religious accommodation as victories for all minorities in Quebec.

The portrayals of the Bouchard-Taylor commission and of individuals seeking accommodation for religious purposes in Quebec's French-language newspapers are vastly different from that provided by The Gazette, which offers a homogeneous examination of the issues surrounding accommodation. The range of opinions and perspectives presented in the Francophone media is expansive, and the presses do not avoid printing inflammatory editorials and opinion pieces. The Francophone media's use of subjective terms like extremist, fundamentalist, and fanatic to describe religious minorities, their tendency to portray these individuals as rejectionists of modernity and Quebec culture, and their inability to depict them as legitimate members of Quebec society, contrasts sharply with The Gazette's unwavering acceptance of visible religious minorities and diverse religious practices. This contrast demonstrates the cultural differences between Anglophones and Francophones in Quebec, which affects the perception of visible religious minorities.

The uniform, centralist culture rooted in Catholicism that largely defines Francophone Quebec, which emphasizes justice, love and religious discretion, acts as a barrier towards

the acceptance of religious minorities on their terms despite the strong desire of the majority of Francophone Quebecers to embrace religious minorities and extend fair and even treatment towards them. Beyond the Quebec context, this culture influences the integration of minorities in countries such as France and Switzerland, where debates regarding visible religious minorities have produced strong reactions in the population. Moving forward, the Bouchard-Taylor Commission will likely serve as an important case study from which further insight may be gleaned into the complex issues surrounding the accommodation of visible religious minorities in other Western contexts and the role of the media in shaping public opinion.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> S. Lefebvre developed this argument in "Between Law and Public Opinion", in Lori Beaman and Peter Beyer (eds), *Diversity and Religion in Canada* [Religion and the Social Order 16], Leiden/Boston, Brill, 2008, p.175-198

<sup>2</sup> As discussed with Henri Atlan during the October 22<sup>nd</sup> inaugural conference (see paper in this proceedings), in other countries and contexts these terms are similarly misused to describe religious minorities.

<sup>3</sup> Paul's Epistle - 1 Corinthians 13:1

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 6:5-6 (RSV translation)

<sup>5</sup> See S. Lefebvre, "Politics and Religion in Quebec," in John English, Richard Gwyn & P. Whitney Lackenbauer (eds), *The Hidden Pierre Trudeau. The Faith Behind the Politics* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2004) 57-64.

<sup>6</sup> See E.-Martin Meunier, Laniel, Jean-François et Jean-Christophe Demers, «Permanence et recomposition de la «religion culturelle». Aperçu socio-historique du catholicisme québécois (1970-2005)», in Robert Mager et Serge Cantin (dirs.), *Religion et modernité au Québec*, Québec, P.U.L., à paraître en 2009, 55 pages

<sup>7</sup> "alors qu'on "basculer du mysticisme au combat " M. Jurgensmeyer, *Au nom de Dieu, ils tuent!* (Paris : Autrement, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> B. Rigal-Cellard, *Missions extrêmes en Amérique du Nord. Des jésuites à Raël*, (Bordeaux : Pleine Page Éditeur, 2005)

<sup>9</sup> Multani v. Commission Scolaire Marguerite Bourgeoys [2006] 1 S.C.R. 256, 2006 SCC 6.

<sup>10</sup> «présenter comme 'éternel' sans faire la part des développements historiques qui ont conduit à son corps de doctrines tel qu'il est reçu actuellement » See Bernard Dupuy, «Le judaïsme» in *Encyclopédie des religions* (Paris : Encyclopaedia Universalis, 2002) 99.

<sup>11</sup> Syndicat Northcrest v. Amselem, [2004] 2 S.C.R. 551, 2004 SCC 47.

<sup>12</sup> Syndicat Northcrest v. Amselem, [2004] 2 S.C.R. 551, 2004 SCC 47.

<sup>13</sup> Robitaille, Antoine. Bouchard à court d'arguments pro-diversité *Le Devoir* 17 Aug. 2007

<sup>14</sup> Elkouri, Rima "Les nouvelles solitudes" *La Presse* 18 Aug. 2007 : A7; Ouimet, Michèle "L'homme qui parlait trop" *La Presse* 27 Aug. 2007 : A5; Cousineau, Louise "Les intellos ne sont pas encore réconciliés avec la télévision!" *La Presse* 25 Aug. 2007 : ARTS SPECTACLES5; Delisle, Norman. "La commission Bouchard-Taylor nie avoir accusé TVA d'antisémitisme" *La Presse* 2 Nov. 2007 : A14

<sup>15</sup> Bouchard, Gerard and Charles Taylor. *Building the future: a time for reconciliation*. (Quebec, Que.: Commission de consultation sur les pratiques d'accommodement reliées aux différences culturelles, 2008) 39

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 39.



- 
- <sup>18</sup> Bouchard, Gerard and Charles Taylor. *Building the future: a time for reconciliation*. (Quebec, Que.: Commission de consultation sur les pratiques d'accommodement reliées aux différences culturelles, 2008) 69-73.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., 74.
- <sup>20</sup> Bouchard, *Building the future: a time for reconciliation*. 75.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., 185.
- <sup>22</sup> McDonnell, Jim. "Religion, education, and the communication of values." Religion and the media: An introductory reader. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1993) 93.
- <sup>23</sup> Media sources examined for this article include: *Le Devoir*, *La Presse*, *La Presse Canadienne*, *Le Droit*, *Le Soleil*, *La Tribune*, *Le Nouvelliste*, *The Gazette*, and the magazine *L'Actualité*.
- <sup>24</sup> Saidon, Mathieu. "Conserver sa culture laïque," *Le Devoir* 6 Aug. 2007: A6.
- <sup>25</sup> Henley, Kevin. "Gare au racisme 'raisonnable,'" *La Presse* 16 Sep. 2007: A17.
- <sup>26</sup> Simard, Marc. "Limiter la liberté religieuse à la pratique privée," *Le Soleil*. 17 Feb. 2007 : 35.
- <sup>27</sup> Arseneault, Michel. "Le Turban? Quel turban?" *Actualité* 33:20 (2008): 72.
- <sup>28</sup> See: Lortie, Marie-Claude. "Virginité, tolerance et égalité," *La Presse* 18 Nov. 2008: A22; Ouimet, Michèle. "C'est la faute au voile," *La Presse* 11 Dec. 2007: A7.
- <sup>29</sup> Buzzetti, Hélène. "La Cour suprême s'est trompée," *Le Devoir* 9 Nov. 2007: A3.
- <sup>30</sup> Conseil du Statut de la Femme. *Droit à l'égalité entre les femmes et les hommes et liberté religieuse - Avis, No. 207-06-A* (Quebec: Conseil du statut de la femme, 2007)
- <sup>31</sup> Lagacé, Patrick "Voile Maudit" *La Presse* 26 Nov. 2007: A.3.
- <sup>32</sup> Lagacé, Patrick "La photo de Kader," *La Presse* 28 Nov. 2007: A.4.
- <sup>33</sup> Macpherson, Don. "Quebecers are in a Herouxville state of mind; Reasonable accommodations and wrangling for nationalist votes marked the year," *The Gazette* 22 Dec, 2007 : B.7; Macpherson, Don. "We might begin to hear new voices as hearings hit city; So far, old- stock francophones from the regions mainly had their say," *The Gazette* 27 Nov. 2007 : A.19.
- <sup>34</sup> "Briefs didn't really represent anglophones," *The Gazette* 26 Dec. 2007 : A.30; "Bouchard-Taylor study deserves a fair chance," *The Gazette* 8 Sep, 2007 :B.6
- <sup>35</sup> Macpherson, Don. "Anglos don't seem to understand accommodation crisis," *The Gazette* 1 Dec. 2007: B7
- <sup>36</sup> Heinrich, Jeff. "Accommodation no threat," *The Gazette* 28 May 2008 : A.6
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., A.6.
- <sup>38</sup> Harrold, Max. "Justify Your Existence," *The Gazette* 8 Dec, 2007 : B.2

## **Religions et *entertainment* médiatique : sont-ils compatibles?**

Guy Marchessault  
Université Saint-Paul

**Résumé :** Est-ce possible de réconcilier l'approche spectaculaire des médias avec la nature intérieure du spirituel? Peut-on imaginer la présence des religions dans une ambiance de divertissement? Il y a toujours eu tensions entre les religions et le jeu: elles craignaient le théâtre, les jeux, la musique, les arts, la danse, les jeux de cartes... et les médias, naturellement. Pourquoi l'*entertainment* fut-il considéré si dangereux? N'y aurait-il pas une approche plus positive qui permettrait de discerner les ouvertures vers le spirituel ressortant du jeu et de l'*entertainment* médiatique? Un historien, un réalisateur de film, des chercheurs en communication, un philosophe, plusieurs sociologues et anthropologues ont su raffiner la compréhension des capacités du jeu de révéler les humains à eux-mêmes dans leur recherche de signification et leur cheminement spirituel. Le jeu – et le divertissement médiatique – pourraient ouvrir les humains à leurs propres capacités «illimitées», donnant signification à leurs relations au monde et aux autres humains, et par le fait même au sacré. Mais cela ne peut réussir que si chacun respecte les langages médiatiques: la narrativité et la façon de raconter. Ce qui implique une créativité artistique et rhétorique, combinée à un respect pour les dimensions éthiques et spirituelles des croyants.

**Mots clés :** *médias, divertissement, religion, industries culturelles*

**Abstract:** Is it possible to reconcile the spectacular approach of the media with the inner nature of the spiritual? Can one imagine the presence of religions within an ambience of entertainment? There always were tensions between religions and plays and games: they feared theatre, play, music, arts, dance, cards... and media, of course. Why are play and entertainment considered to be so dangerous? Would it be a better approach to discern true spiritual openings through play, and through media entertainment? A historian, a film director, some communication researchers, a philosopher, different sociologists and anthropologists refined understandings of the capacity of play revealing the human search for meaning, and spiritual journey. Play – and media entertainment – can open humans to their own 'unlimited' potentialities, giving significance to their relation with the world and with other humans, and so with the sacredness. But this can be done only if one respects the typical languages of the media: narratives and storytelling, which implies capacity of creativity in arts and rhetoric, combined with respect for ethical and spiritual dimensions of believers.

**Key words:** *media, entertainment, religion, cultural industries*

## Introduction

Le thème de ma présentation : religion et *entertainment* médiatique sont-ils compatibles?<sup>1</sup> peut sembler a priori une question très intellectuelle, plutôt notionnelle et bien éloignée de la réalité de la religion. Ce n'est pourtant pas le cas, comme je vais tenter de le démontrer.

Ma présentation se divisera en cinq points: 1) les craintes que manifestent plusieurs religions envers le jeu, les jeux et l'*entertainment*; 2) une meilleure compréhension du jeu et des jeux, en accord avec un certain nombre de spécialistes (anthropologues, philosophes, sociologues, ainsi que producteurs médiatiques et penseurs); 3) un essai de rapprochement entre religion et *entertainment* médiatique; 4) quelques allusions aux dangers éthiques de l'*entertainment* médiatique; enfin, 5) quelques conditions pour une relation féconde entre religion et *entertainment* médiatique.

### 1) LES CRAINTES QUE MANIFESTENT PLUSIEURS RELIGIONS ENVERS LE JEU, LES JEUX ET L'ENTERTAINMENT

Deux grandes religions au moins, le christianisme et l'islam, ont toujours manifesté des craintes envers le divertissement – jeu et jeux, *entertainment* – et l'ont considéré comme un danger potentiel. En Occident, dans les premiers siècles du christianisme, il exista une appréhension contre le jeu. Je vois au moins trois raisons pour cela. Premièrement, le jeu, les jeux et le divertissement furent immédiatement mis en relation avec les carnivals, les excès dans la boisson et le sexe; les religions, au contraire, faisaient la promotion de l'ascétisme, de l'ordre et du respect. Deuxièmement, le jeu, les jeux et le divertissement réfèrent immédiatement à une activité «non sérieuse», parce qu'ils réfèrent au monde des enfants, qui peuvent jouer des heures sans aucune conséquence sérieuse sur leur vie; ainsi, sous cet aspect, jeu et superficialité semblaient devenir plutôt synonymes.

Troisièmement, le jeu, les jeux et le divertissement pouvaient dissimuler une situation très triste et indésirable, ainsi que l'a souligné l'auteur français bien connu Blaise Pascal en parlant du «divertissement»: il détourne les gens des vraies questions touchant la vie et la mort, Dieu, le sens de leur vie, et ainsi de suite. Il nous «entretient» (*entertains*) dans le

temps et nous éloigne de la réalité, pour nous aider à passer le temps. Le fameux auteur italien Umberto Eco décrit justement dans son célèbre livre *Le nom de la rose*<sup>2</sup> la haine religieuse qui peut exister contre le jeu, le rire, le plaisir et le divertissement.

En Europe, cette crainte des chrétiens contre le jeu et le divertissement s'est transmise jusqu'au Moyen âge et à la Renaissance, même si le peuple n'a jamais arrêté en fait d'avoir du plaisir. Cela a eu un impact majeur sur au moins deux courants religieux des 17<sup>e</sup> et 18<sup>e</sup> siècles, le jansénisme en Europe centrale, et le puritanisme en Europe du Nord. Ces deux mouvements religieux amèneront d'importantes conséquences en Amérique du Nord, ma place d'origine. En voici deux exemples.

Le premier exemple provient de ma propre région, le Québec, une province canadienne où on parle surtout français. Jusqu'en 1960, les Canadiens francophones étaient bien connus comme étant extrêmement religieux: 80% à 90% des gens pratiquaient régulièrement le dimanche, on y vivait dans un environnement entièrement chrétien. Le jansénisme a eu alors un sérieux impact sur la façon de vivre la foi: la boisson, la musique, la danse, les carnavals et toutes choses semblables furent pratiquement totalement interdits. La sexualité était perçue comme un des comportements humains les plus questionnables. Pour demeurer un bon chrétien et aller au ciel, chacun devait demeurer loin de toutes formes de divertissement dangereux.

En conséquence, comme bien l'on pense, l'arrivée du cinéma, de la radio, de la télévision... fut tout de suite condamnée par les autorités religieuses. Le seul média toléré fut la presse, en autant qu'elle demeurait sous le contrôle des leaders religieux. Toutefois, à partir des années 1960, la population exigea une transformation de la société et rejeta la religion en tant que point de référence: on appela ce mouvement la «révolution tranquille». Les médias prirent leur complète autonomie. L'approche aux questions morales et sociales changea si rapidement et si dramatiquement que, en 50 ans, le Québec passa de ce qu'on avait coutume d'appeler une «société dirigée par les prêtres» («a priest-ridden society») à un monde presque entièrement séculier, ce qu'il continue d'être aujourd'hui. De nos jours, les médias jouent un rôle majeur dans cette société, alors que

la religion institutionnelle est généralement rejetée par la population, et en conséquence par les médias aussi. Une situation plutôt dramatique pour la religion, n'est-ce pas?

Le second exemple nous provient de notre pays voisin, les États-Unis d'Amérique<sup>3 4</sup>. Là, les immigrants en provenance d'Europe du Nord apportèrent avec eux le puritanisme. Ce fut même pire qu'au Québec et au Canada. Non seulement la boisson, la musique, la danse, les carnivals furent-ils interdits, mais même les jeux de cartes et toutes les autres sortes de jeux. Le sociologue Max Weber expliqua plus tard dans sa sociologie de la religion que ces gens avaient organisé leur société et leur vie en fonction de ce qu'il a appelé la morale anglo-saxonne: «Pas de temps à perdre dans le jeu et les jeux, nous sommes sur terre pour travailler et travailler dur. Ce faisant, Dieu récompensera notre travail et nous donnera une merveilleuse vie sur terre, avant que nous allions ensuite au ciel».

Il est facile d'imaginer que les divers médias ne furent pas bien reçus aux États-Unis. Tous les jeux furent vite condamnés. Le cinéma fut considéré comme le pire d'entre eux, parce que son impact était immense sur le peuple. Des groupes protestants organisèrent de nombreux boycottages à travers le pays, avec un succès mitigé toutefois. À partir des années 1930, les catholiques lancèrent un mouvement national appelé «The Legion of Decency», «La légion de la décence», et se joignirent souvent aux protestants pour forcer les producteurs d'Hollywood d'éviter une série de thèmes considérés comme immoraux: la sexualité, bien sûr, mais aussi la religion, le divorce, le jeu et plusieurs autres. Cette sorte de censure se perpétua pendant environ une cinquantaine d'années. Dans les années 1970 et 1980, la «Legion of Decency» devint obsolète; personne ne s'en occupa plus. C'est encore le cas aujourd'hui.

Grâce à ces deux exemples pris en Amérique du Nord, on peut comprendre comment les religions en général ont développé une crainte certaine et une agressivité envers les médias et pourquoi elles les ont condamnés si souvent, spécialement en relation avec leur approche du divertissement. Elles n'étaient pas complètement dans l'erreur d'ailleurs, comme nous allons le voir dans le quatrième point que je développerai plus tard, alors que je présenterai quelques-uns des dangers éthiques liés à l'*entertainment*.

## 2) UNE MEILLEURE COMPRÉHENSION DU JEU ET DES JEUX, SELON CERTAINS SPÉCIALISTES

J'aimerais maintenant introduire quelques points de vue en provenance de différentes personnalités qui ont tenté de discerner la signification réelle du jeu et des jeux dans la vie des humains, et qui nous permettent d'aller plus loin qu'une notion de pure perte de temps digne seulement des enfants. Je référerai brièvement à quelques anthropologues, philosophes et sociologues surtout d'Occident, de même qu'à certains réalisateurs et penseurs des médias.

Le premier anthropologue que je souhaite présenter, c'est Johan Huizinga, des Pays-Bas, qui en 1938 publia un livre très fameux intitulé *Homo Ludens*<sup>5</sup>. Dans cette publication, il décrit les principales caractéristiques du jeu: il fonctionne dans un lieu précis, un temps donné, avec des rituels établis, avec des objets et personnes bien délimités. À travers ces mises en place, quelque chose se produit, qui a l'air plutôt inoffensif – le jeu n'est-il pas une activité pour les enfants, pensent plusieurs –, mais qui en fait dévoile des situations qui se révèlent être de la plus haute importance pour les humains, affirme-t-il.

Et de donner plusieurs exemples. Jouer avec les concepts, pour les philosophes. Jouer avec les chiffres, pour les mathématiciens. Jouer avec des instruments de musique, piano ou violon par exemple, pour les artistes. Jouer avec les mots en public, pour les rhéteurs. Jouer en architecture, à travers la créativité et les concours. Jouer dans tous les arts. Et ainsi de suite. Il n'est plus permis d'affirmer alors que le jeu n'a aucune importance, pense-t-il.

Huizinga ira cependant beaucoup plus loin lorsqu'il établira des relations entre le jeu et le sacré. Le jeu de théâtre, dit-il, fut la première façon d'établir des relations avec la divinité. Cela devint un moyen d'exprimer indirectement des attitudes envers les dieux dangereux, les sorciers demeurant la plupart du temps caché derrière un masque qui protégeait les humains afin qu'ils ne soient pas reconnus. Les grandes religions utilisent maintenant la même approche avec leurs propres rituels; la messe, en christianisme, par exemple, est un parfait exemple de jeu, de théâtre sacré comprenant des rituels symboliques; il est d'ailleurs reconnu comme tel par les liturgistes. Un lieu spécifique, un

temps spécifique, des rituels spécifiques, des personnes et des objets sacrés: les rituels sacrés correspondent formellement aux caractéristiques du jeu et des jeux.

Plus tard, un anthropologue français, Roger Caillois, se permit de rouvrir le débat en 1950 dans son livre *L'homme et le sacré*<sup>6</sup>. Il se montra d'accord avec les intuitions de Huizinga, sauf qu'il en dénonça un aspect précis: il refusa le point de vue de Huizinga voulant faire du sacré un jeu représenté à son meilleur à travers le théâtre. Cette expression du sacré, argumenta-t-il, se révèle être à l'extrême opposé du jeu et des jeux: alors que le jeu est fondamentalement une action libre qui vise à relaxer et à restaurer la santé physique et psychologique, l'expression du sacré à travers le jeu en représentation face aux divinités n'a pour but que de préserver la vie humaine contre la malignité des dieux; le jeu est alors sous forte tension et fondamentalement fondé sur la peur et la crainte.

En 1966, le philosophe allemand Eugen Fink<sup>7</sup> se déclara globalement d'accord avec l'approche de Huizinga, sauf en ce qui concerne la question du sacré – se joignant à la critique de Caillois. Oui, dit-il, c'est vrai que le jeu a besoin d'un monde «externe», dans lequel on oublie les choses ordinaires de la vie et qui possède ses propres règles construites sur le «fair play». Mais, selon lui, la perception négative du jeu en Occident dérive surtout de Platon. Ce philosophe grec considérait le jeu comme une simple reproduction de la vie réelle, utile seulement aux enfants, ou pour nous aider à passer le temps. D'après lui, une reproduction de quelque chose ne peut se réclamer d'une réelle valeur, elle n'en demeure qu'une pâle réflexion (telle l'image); ça n'est pas sérieux. L'intention de Platon était de démontrer que les idées sont la réalité et que poésie et art ne doivent être perçus que comme des degrés vers le vrai, qui repose dans les idées.

C'est pourtant là une fausse approche, prétend Fink. Au contraire, le jeu aide fondamentalement à comprendre les relations entre les humains; et, dans l'Antiquité, il véhicule en plus une perception des relations entre les humains et les dieux et déesses. Le problème avec ce dernier type de relations, c'est que les humains n'étaient pas libres de jouer le jeu (si l'on peut dire); ils se considéraient comme des marionnettes dans les mains des divinités; c'était une question de survivance: ils se devaient d'entrer en contact

avec les divinités de telle sorte à les empêcher de se fâcher contre eux. Ainsi, ce n'est pas là exactement du jeu, même si – comme l'expliquait Huizinga – cette action en avait les caractéristiques. Par ailleurs, le défi de l'humain moderne, pour Fink, c'est exactement de rapatrier cette force externe du jeu pour en faire usage en vue de mieux comprendre la sorte de relations qui existent réellement entre les hommes et les femmes de notre monde. Alors, le jeu devient une sorte de théâtre des interactions humaines et ainsi il donne appui à de sérieuses réflexions sur la nature humaine, en relation ou non avec le sacré (comme dans une pièce de Shakespeare, par exemple).

À son tour, la sociologue Suzanne Lilar, qui connaît ces auteurs, se montre d'accord avec eux. Elle aussi reconnaît les principales intuitions de Huizinga, tout en formulant les mêmes restrictions concernant le sacré. Mais elle en profite pour élargir les perspectives d'une manière fort intéressante, et ceci est crucial en ce qui nous concerne. Le jeu, dit-elle, peut assurément ouvrir sur des perspectives sacrées, au moins sur des recherches spirituelles, parce qu'il se base sur notre capacité d'imagination. Ce pouvoir d'imagination se révèle absolument fondamental chez les êtres humains, car il leur permet de découvrir que leurs capacités sont «illimitées», ouvrant ainsi sur les potentialités profondes de leur vie; il leur donne l'imagination d'inventer de nouveaux sentiers, de nouvelles façons de voir le monde et de nouvelles paroles, de nouveaux gestes et symboles pour exprimer la signification de leur vie en ce monde. N'est-ce pas exactement ce qu'on appelle aujourd'hui... la recherche du spirituel?

À partir de cet échange d'idées sur le divertissement et le jeu, je retiens que le jeu peut ouvrir des potentialités extraordinaires vers de nouvelles attentes dans nos vies. C'est là une approche merveilleuse à ce que je définirais comme étant un «cheminement spirituel», à la base même de toute implication religieuse personnelle. En ce sens, le jeu donne une chance merveilleuse au spirituel de s'exprimer dans le cheminement humain, et alors il ouvre la porte aux religions.

Je comprends également que, au moins en principe, l'*entertainment* médiatique peut lui aussi ouvrir ces potentialités de perception spirituelle pour des gens intéressés à élargir le sens de leur vie, spécialement grâce à tous les sortes de jeux de représentation. Si cela



s'avère vrai pour le jeu et le divertissement en général, cela devrait l'être aussi pour l'*entertainment* médiatique. Le jeu est une sorte de «time out», de moment d'arrêt qui donne aux gens l'opportunité d'imaginer leur vie autrement ou de donner une signification autre à leur vie. L'*entertainment* médiatique, une des formes de jeu, apparaît alors comme l'un de ces temps d'arrêt capables de provoquer les gens à réexaminer leur propre vie, pas nécessairement seulement dans le silence d'une «poustinia» (ce qui est une bonne chose assurément), mais à partir des représentations médiatiques qui touchent leur propre vie et ont un impact sur leur comportement.

3) ENTERTAINMENT MÉDIATIQUE ET EXPRESSION DU SPIRITUEL  
Cette possibilité étant établie, quelle sorte de connexions peut-on imaginer entre l'expression de la religion et la présence du spirituel dans l'*entertainment* médiatique? Ce serait la suivante: pour être présente adéquatement en pleine culture médiatique, toute foi religieuse doit manifester un potentiel et des habilités à exprimer sa spiritualité à travers le divertissement. Qu'est-ce à dire?

Toutes les religions se doivent d'extérioriser leur expérience spirituelle intime. Les langages des grandes religions sont bien connus: le livre sacré, les prières (publiques ou privées), l'explication des écritures saintes, la théologie et les dogmes, le langage des mystiques, la proclamation et les sermons, etc. Selon moi, aucun de ces langages ne parvient à passer facilement la rampe dans le monde de l'*entertainment* médiatique aujourd'hui. Pourquoi? Parce qu'ils ne correspondent pas aux principaux langages médiatiques; car l'*entertainment* médiatique s'exprime grâce à des procédés de langage aux contours rhétoriques et esthétiques très précis, ce qui en général s'ajuste plutôt mal aux expressions religieuses ci-haut mentionnées. Mais que voulons-nous signifier en parlant des langages rhétoriques et esthétiques? Je m'explique ici brièvement.

Ce qui est typique de toute forme d'*entertainment* médiatique, c'est sa capacité de narrativité, en d'autres termes de raconter des histoires dans l'espace public<sup>8</sup>. C'est d'ailleurs typique de tout discours sur la place publique: pour retenir l'attention d'un auditoire, vous devez être intéressant, captivant; sinon vous perdez son attention, et vite. Il n'y a là rien de neuf: c'est cette même capacité de raconter des histoires qui captivaient

les gens autour des feux de camp dans les vieux jours anciens. C'est le même phénomène qui s'est maintenant multiplié grâce aux médias de masse.

En général, les religions ont cette capacité de raconter leur propre histoire, quand elles expliquent à travers des situations ce qui est arrivé à leurs groupes; elles donnent de bons exemples des personnes importantes qui ont joué un rôle majeur dans le cheminement de leurs communautés. Ce genre de narrativité est bien reçu ordinairement par les médias, justement parce qu'il se base sur la narrativité. C'est pourquoi les témoignages (qu'ils soient réels ou inventés) peuvent jouer un rôle si important à travers les systèmes de communication partout dans le monde.

Mais est-ce vraiment le rôle de la religion que de «jouer ce jeu», de raconter des histoires? Ne serions-nous pas alors en train de reproduire les patterns typiques des télévangélistes états-uniens en train de raconter de courtes histoires, entourés de chorales de belles jeunes filles et de superbes fleurs? Où nous en allons-nous avec cette question d'histoires racontées, réelles ou fictives?

À cette étape, j'aimerais introduire dans la discussion le point de vue d'un réalisateur de film français très renommé, Jean-Luc Godard, dont les réflexions plutôt philosophiques au sujet de la narrativité et de la propagande dans les médias sont dignes de notre attention. Godard, un des leaders de la «nouvelle vague» au cinéma, s'était orienté à faire des films... sans narrativité, c'est-à-dire sans histoire. Pourquoi? Parce qu'il craignait que le spectateur se voit attrapé par l'intrigue au point où il pourrait perdre tout esprit critique et toute capacité de distanciation. Donc, volontairement, il brisait l'intrigue; il détruisait la «diérèse», et ainsi il allait volontairement à l'opposé de la tendance instinctive de tout spectateur vers les transferts psychologiques, qu'ils soient mimétiques ou cathartiques. Au fond, il les empêchait de «jouer le jeu». Résultat: ses films se révélaient fort ennuyeux, sauf pour les personnes initiées à sa recherche. Comment une histoire impossible à suivre parce qu'elle n'a pas d'intrigue pourrait-elle être intéressante? C'était là chez lui un positionnement philosophique radical.

Pourtant, il a dû changer d'idée dans un de ses films, «La Chinoise», en 1967. Dans ce film, il suivait avec sa caméra une petite cellule de jeunes maoïstes à Paris, cellule qui était guidée par une jeune femme qui s'inspirait de l'expérience chinoise. Dans le groupe, il eut l'occasion de rencontrer un jeune artiste originaire de l'Europe de l'Est. Cet acteur le mit au défi: «Vous ne croyez pas dans la fiction? Assurément, quand j'acte, j'invente, je crée à partir de ma propre imagination. Mais qu'est-ce que vous croyez: que c'est faux? Pas du tout: ce que j'imagine et que je joue devant vous pourrait se produire, cela pourrait devenir réalité. La fiction peut conduire à la réalité». Un peu plus loin dans le film, Godard mettra dans la bouche d'un acteur cette phrase-choc: «L'imaginaire n'est pas le reflet du réel, mais le réel du reflet». En d'autres mots, bien souvent l'imaginaire réussit mieux à condenser la réalité que la pure réalité en elle-même.

Ne rejoignons-nous pas ici directement ce que nous expliquait Suzanne Lilar, quand elle expliquait que le jeu et la fiction peuvent ouvrir des potentialités extraordinaires pour les humains? Ne dit-on pas souvent que le meilleur moment pour les gens de s'ouvrir à de nouvelles intuitions et de nouvelles recherches sur le sens fondamental de leurs vies, c'est pendant les vacances et les loisirs?

Alors, raconter des histoires, faire des représentations, du théâtre, de la télévision, de l'audio, de la musique sur disques ou même des recherches sur internet peut ouvrir à des opportunités extraordinaires, chez les êtres humains, pour faire des progrès sur divers sentiers spirituels, voire même de découvrir leur spiritualité de façon radicale. Il existe plusieurs études qui vont maintenant dans cette direction, spécialement celles produites par des chercheurs de l'Université du Colorado à Boulder, aux États-Unis<sup>9</sup>.

Quelles sortes de relations entre les grandes religions et l'*entertainment* médiatique peuvent ressortir de cette approche sur la capacité des médias à transmettre le spirituel? La réponse n'est pas nécessairement facile, et cela pour plusieurs raisons. Premièrement, la même peur des médias continue d'exister chez les religions, parce qu'elles n'en ont pas le contrôle. Deuxièmement, les médias réclameront de plus en plus leur indépendance; on peut être sûr que c'est tout à l'honneur des médias que de se montrer aussi indépendants que possible vis-à-vis de toutes formes de pouvoirs, sauf la leur; ils détestent être

possédés par d'autres, même si on leur dit que c'est pour la plus grande gloire de Dieu... Troisièmement, l'*entertainment* médiatique n'est pas nécessairement sans tache et sans problème; il n'apparaît pas toujours parfaitement éthique, rhétoriquement et esthétiquement parlant. Quatrièmement, en situation de libre marché telle que nous la connaissons actuellement à travers le monde, le but primordial des entrepreneurs médiatiques demeurera de faire encore et toujours plus d'argent, ce qui peut évidemment détourner les productions loin des meilleures intentions d'ouverture à des productions spirituelles. C'est pourquoi il nous faut maintenant dire quelques mots sur les dangers éthiques de l'*entertainment* médiatique.

#### 4) LES DANGERS ÉTHIQUES DE L'ENTERTAINMENT MÉDIATIQUE

C'est bien évident: il existe bon nombre de dangers liés à l'*entertainment* médiatique. J'aimerais ici décrire brièvement cinq de ces dangers, à savoir: la possible superficialité de l'*entertainment*; le danger religieux de l'idolâtrie; le danger du manque de qualité de la production artistique; les problèmes résultant de l'emprise des groupes financiers sur l'industrie culturelle; enfin, la qualité ou non de réception dans la population.

##### **Qu'est que l'*entertainment* médiatique?**

Permettez-moi tout d'abord de fournir une brève description de la façon dont s'exprime l'*entertainment* médiatique, à partir du pays où il se manifeste le plus fort: les États-Unis d'Amérique.

Souvenons-nous que, de nos jours, dans la plus grande partie du monde, le libre marché sert de référence économique standard. Cela a une énorme influence sur les médias et sur l'*entertainment* médiatique, étant donné que tout obéit à la loi de l'offre et de la demande. On connaît tout cela depuis un bon moment<sup>10</sup>. Dans un tel contexte, qu'arrive-t-il à ce marché? Quelles en sont les conséquences sur la production de l'*entertainment* médiatique? Ces questions sont très bien répondues dans un livre récent écrit par un spécialiste de l'*entertainment*, un auteur des États-Unis, Michael J. Wolf<sup>11</sup>.

Selon Wolf, le plaisir est devenu le moteur central dans le choix de tel ou tel programme, ou de tel journal (et nous pouvons maintenant ajouter: de tel site internet).

L'*entertainment* est dorénavant à la portée de tout un chacun, contrairement au passé. Alors, cela devient un «must» pour l'industrie du divertissement de toujours mieux connaître leurs auditoires potentiels et de toujours mieux y ajuster leurs produits. Or, ces auditoires deviennent toujours plus difficiles à satisfaire; c'est la raison pour laquelle les études de marché jouent un rôle si crucial, en vue de mieux prévoir les situations qui bougent constamment. La recherche impérieuse du plaisir révèle que les gens sont devenus ce que Wolf appelle «hédonomiques» (contraction pour hédonistes et économiques), exigeant que tout bien ou service soit dorénavant combiné à une expérience de plaisir. Cette expérience de plaisir, dans l'espace public, nous provient la plupart du temps à travers le divertissement. Donc, explique Wolf, vous ne pouvez plus vendre quelque service ou bien que ce soit aujourd'hui si vous n'y ajoutez pas le facteur «E», pour *Entertainment*.

Tout cela soulève une question très sérieuse: comment détecter une production d'*entertainment* qui aura du succès? Comment faire un choix décisif entre des productions très bonnes et des moins bonnes? C'est vrai pour la musique, les photographies, les films, les programmes de télévision, la radio, etc. La grande question ici devient celle de découvrir les vrais talents, ce qui s'avère un travail pas du tout évident. Certaines personnes s'adonnent à posséder des intuitions remarquables, mieux que les autres; elles ressentent non seulement l'air du temps à tel moment donné; mais, même plus, elles peuvent anticiper ce qu'espère le public dans l'avenir prochain. Elles deviennent des sortes de héros... mais malheureusement seulement pour un court laps de temps, car rien n'empêche qu'elles se trompent ensuite grossièrement et, la fois suivante, provoquent des échecs retentissants.

Quand elles réussissent, cependant, ces personnes proposent des productions qui sont appelées à devenir ce qu'on appelle des «hits» (des coups de circuit au baseball); c'est le genre de productions que quiconque ne voudrait rater à aucun prix. Si ces «hits» acquièrent une reconnaissance internationale et engendrent de nombreux produits dérivés de marketing, elles en deviendront des «phénomènes». Qu'est-ce qui caractérise les phénomènes? C'est qu'ils resteront dans la mémoire inconsciente collective en tant que point de référence essentiel, tellement importants, que toute nouvelle production devra

s'y référer dans l'avenir. Évidemment, les «hits» et les «phénomènes» attireront à leur suite des revenus incommensurables versés aux producteurs et réalisateurs, de même qu'aux artistes. Et ils influenceront directement sur la culture et les valeurs, même dans des pays fort différents.

De l'avis de Michael J. Wolf, un type spécial de marketing joue avec beaucoup de succès un rôle pour faire mousser les «hits». Il l'explique grâce à la bonne vieille théorie du «two-step flow» en communication (sur le rôle des intermédiaires pour attirer d'autres clients). Il dénomme ces intermédiaires des «consommateurs alpha»: conscients avant les autres de la qualité de certaines productions lancées par des nouveaux venus, ils en parleront avec louange, pressant parents et amis de se les procurer. Si ce mouvement devient assez fort, il se produira un enthousiasme collectif... et cela pourra donner un «hit».

Quel serait l'avenir de l'*entertainment* médiatique, selon Wolf? Merveilleux, répond-il dans sa perspective capitaliste. Il y a encore des milliards d'humains qui attendent toujours plus de productions divertissantes partout dans le monde. Il démontre ainsi une attitude conquérante, sans prêter trop d'attention à la diversité des cultures et des religions. Il concède que, dans un marché libre, les religions ne sont pas le plus souvent bienvenues; d'une certaine façon, dit-il, les médias ont dorénavant pris la place de la religion, grâce à leurs rituels renouvelés orientés plutôt vers l'émotionnel; il dénomme cela la religion «légère» («soft»). Mais il nous rappelle que, à la fin, l'ultime sélection en vue d'une présence réussie dans l'*entertainment* médiatique se trouve précisément dans... les langages même de l'*entertainment*, parce que ce sont les langages du plaisir, les langages qui réunissent le plus de gens, donc les langages qui paient le plus.

Et il en conclut que les humains ne sont jamais vraiment des personnes rationnelles (quoiqu'ils le soient parfois), mais plutôt des boules d'émotions, remplis de désirs et d'aspirations: ils se reconnaissent à travers les héros qui triomphent des situations difficiles, les héroïnes qui luttent en prenant des risques pour répondre aux désirs de leur cœur. Les histoires qui nous bouleversent, les personnages auxquels nous pouvons nous identifier, les idées qui changent une situation, les effets spéciaux qui surplombent la vie

ordinaire: tout cela, c'est du bon *entertainment*. Toutes ces sortes de choses sont basées sur notre extraordinaire capacité d'imaginaire. Rappelons cette puissante phrase que nous avons si souvent entendue quand nous étions jeunes: «Il était une fois...»

### **Cinq dangers éthiques**

Je vois au moins cinq dangers reliés à l'*entertainment* médiatique.

1) Le premier danger saute aux yeux de quiconque: la possible superficialité de l'*entertainment*, du «divertissement» qui nous empêche d'être sérieusement attentifs à la vraie vie, aux vrais faits, aux personnes en chair et en os. Il peut vous tirer en dehors, vers un mode d'existence superficiel. Maintes fois, le divertissement se révèle fort utile pour prendre du repos, pour s'éloigner de la fatigue ou du travail. Mais il peut aussi devenir comme une fuite vicariale pour éviter de faire face aux relations humaines ou au travail soutenu. Dans quelques cas extrêmes, il fournit constamment de l'amusement à un point tel qu'on peut en parler comme provoquant à vivre sa vie à travers la vie de quelqu'un d'autre, par procuration, à travers les histoires des autres. Et c'est bien connu que, par manque de pouvoir sur sa propre vie, les gens moins favorisés sont les plus souvent sujets à cette forme d'aliénation. C'est particulièrement fort avec les films et la télé, mais le même impact peut se manifester aussi dans l'abus d'internet par exemple.

Le second danger, c'est l'idolâtrie. L'idolâtrie est fondamentalement l'acte de prendre un objet ou une personne comme le point de référence fondamental dans sa propre vie, sans respect pour leur propre signification: le résultat en est que l'idolâtre utilise cet objet ou cette personne à son service et tente de les manipuler pour ses propres fins. Le meilleur exemple d'idolâtrie, ce sont les formes de reproduction: image, sculpture, dessins, etc. Le judaïsme et l'islam se sont toujours montrés très craintifs face à l'usage de toute forme de représentation de la divinité ou de ses représentants. Et il y eut d'intenses luttes dans le christianisme au sujet de l'acceptation ou non des icônes. Donc, en général, les religions se sont toujours senties plutôt mal à l'aise face à ce défi. Alors, on peut soulever la question: est-il possible pour une religion d'intervenir dans le monde audiovisuel tel que nous le connaissons aujourd'hui, ou est-il préférable d'éviter tout compromis avec ce monde? Mais alors, qu'arrivera-t-il si les personnes religieuses désirent vivre dans le

monde d'aujourd'hui, là où les gens demeurent fascinés par le cinéma, la télévision, l'internet, l'audiovisuel, etc.? Vont-elles se retirer loin quelque part sur la planète? La réponse dépend de chaque religion et de sa perception de ce qui est acceptable ou non. Les réponses vont d'ailleurs probablement différer de l'une à l'autre. Par-delà la question de principe, quel genre de contrôle les religions pourraient-elles effectivement exercer sur leurs membres? Les expériences dans plusieurs pays prouvent que la censure n'a du succès que pour un temps bien bref.

3) Troisième danger: la bonne ou la mauvaise qualité des productions artistiques. Pour des intellectuels dévoués à l'expression religieuse spécialisée, les présentations artistiques et rhétoriques ne comptent pas très fort. Au contraire, cela demeure une préoccupation fondamentale pour les médias de masse. Les artistes, journalistes, personnes de communication attachent une importance cruciale non seulement au contenu, mais aussi au contenant. Lorsque les personnes des religions s'attachent seulement aux contenus, ils passent à côté d'une communication réussie: les gens ne s'attarderont pas à leurs produits; ils s'empresseront de changer de canal, c'est tout.

4) Le quatrième danger s'attache à une dimension plus sociale: il concerne les problèmes résultant de la maîtrise des industries médiatiques par les grands groupes financiers. À travers le processus de mondialisation actuelle, on peut comprendre que la terre est en train de devenir un «village global» où des produits standardisés sont offerts à toutes personnes et nations. Selon moi, il existe dans ce mouvement plusieurs dangers potentiels:

- L'objectif premier de toutes les compagnies transnationales n'est pas nécessairement de présenter des produits artistiques, ni un contenu ouvert au progrès spirituel, mais d'abord et avant tout de faire des profits; aussi ne se gêneront-elles pas le cas échéant pour diluer les productions vers le plus bas commun dénominateur, fussent-elles des pulsions primaires.
- Des prototypes de production peuvent divertir les gens dans des productions de basse valeur, de façon à les soumettre à une intense publicité destinée à provoquer des comportements complètement consuméristes; la culture alors devient une



occasion d'annonces des biens et services. Ce danger fut dénoncé très souvent et à partir de divers points de vue: je pense plus spécifiquement ici à Neil Postman<sup>12</sup>, qui a accusé la télévision de n'être plus qu'un pur coucou («peek-a-boo») qui distrait les gens pour les empêcher de réfléchir de façon raisonnable; et je pense aussi à Guy Debord<sup>13</sup>, qui a expliqué – de rude façon – comment les riches emploient les médias de masse pour projeter leur propre image dans le peuple ordinaire, de telle façon que les gens achètent les services dans le but de ressembler à leurs exploiters.

- Une troisième conséquence provenant de cette internationalisation médiatique demeure le défi constant que constituent ces produits neutres vis-à-vis des productions culturelles locales.

5) Finalement, un cinquième danger guette: la qualité de réception dans la population. Car, en toute fin, qui décide des contenus et des contenants des médias de masse? Les gens ordinaires. Comment en décident-ils? Leurs décisions relèvent des attentes qu'ils ont face à leurs aspirations, à leurs besoins de détente, à leurs désirs et à leurs émotions (conscientes ou inconscientes). Moins le public est conscient de l'art avec lequel on fait des productions avec des approches d'ordres rhétoriques et esthétiques, plus il devient manipulable. C'est pourquoi il s'avère si important d'aider les gens à développer une conscience critique minimale des possibles manipulations médiatiques, de même que de l'inévitable façon de raconter («story-telling»). Cela peut se faire grâce à l'éducommunication (comme l'appelle l'UNESCO), soit l'éducation populaire aux médias.

Comme on peut le voir, les cinq dangers auxquels je viens de faire référence sont tous de nature éthique. Selon moi, l'éthique demeure ici une référence cruciale pour tout usage de l'*entertainment* médiatique.

## 5) DE QUELQUES CONDITIONS POUR UNE RELATION FÉCONDE ENTRE LES RELIGIONS ET L'ENTERTAINMENT MÉDIATIQUE

Dans une perspective que l'on souhaiterait idéalement éthique, que peuvent faire les

religions soit face aux médias, soit à l'intérieur même des médias (qui d'une façon ou d'une autre se révéleront être des médias d'*entertainment*, même en information) ?

Premièrement, les religions se doivent d'apprendre les différents langages des médias, leurs rhétoriques. Il faut comprendre que les médias utilisent différentes approches dans leurs expressions publiques, de façon à retenir l'intérêt des auditoires, et en même temps pour convaincre les gens au sujet de certaines visions qu'ils proposent en regard de ce qui se passe dans le monde.

Par exemple, il se révèle important de comprendre qu'il existe au moins deux grandes approches persuasives dans les médias: l'une est explicite et évidente tant dans l'écriture que dans le son et le visuel; l'autre est loin d'être aussi explicite, mais transporte plein de perceptions du monde.

Dans la première catégorie, on peut reconnaître au moins quatre langages importants:

- La propagande: qui s'essaie à convaincre l'auditoire d'une idéologie particulière ou d'une perception du monde; la propagande ouverte est de plus en plus crainte par les auditoires de nos jours.
- La publicité, les annonces, le marketing: c'est la propagande des biens et services, qui se donne comme utilité de fournir de l'information sur les produits et services disponibles dans la communauté; il y a eu tellement d'abus en publicité qu'il existe dorénavant bon nombre de codes de déontologie tâchant de définir plus précisément ce qui est acceptable ou non.
- Les relations publiques: leur rôle est de présenter ou de préserver ou de défendre la meilleure image possible d'une organisation vis-à-vis du public.
- Finalement, l'information: elle prétend être aussi objective que possible, mais tous admettront aujourd'hui que c'est impossible d'être complètement objectif; tout en se voulant impartiale, elle promeut toujours un point de vue aux dépens des autres, précisément parce qu'elle se doit d'utiliser la narrativité de façon à être comprise par les auditoires.

Ces quatre langages sont nettement orientés dans l'intention de convaincre les gens que la perception médiatique de la réalité qui leur est présentée est la bonne et que la population devrait l'adopter. Selon elle, le résultat devrait en être d'aider les gens à ajuster leur vie à la réalité. «Achetez ceci et vous trouverez le bonheur», «croyez en cela et vous irez au ciel», «appréciez à quel point notre organisme est bien intégré à la communauté», «écoutez nos nouvelles et vous saurez la vraie histoire sur tel événement». Donc, ces langages médiatiques prétendent nous mettre «IN», dans ce qu'ils interprètent comme étant la vraie vie.

Mais il existe un second prototype de langages médiatiques dont l'influence est, à mon avis, extrêmement importante et dont le but est de nous amener exactement dans une direction opposée: «OUT», en dehors de la vraie vie, dans des situations potentielles avec lesquelles il nous serait fort difficile de composer dans la routine quotidienne. Ces situations nous sont proposées à travers le jeu et les jeux, les variétés, les semi-fictions et les fictions.

- Le jeu et les jeux sont là pour nous aider à relaxer, à avoir du plaisir. La plupart du temps, ils ne sont pas très sérieux, et ils n'entendent pas à l'être. «Prenez votre temps, relaxez», disent-ils.
- Les variétés sont déjà plus riches. C'est là qu'on peut découvrir la musique, la danse et ainsi de suite, grâce à des artistes spécialisés. Ces artistes nous proposent différentes dimensions de notre être, ou nous aident à exprimer nos sentiments intérieurs. Quelquefois, ils peuvent même être considérés comme des «haut-parleurs» de nos communautés, car à travers leur art ils expriment des valeurs profondes ou des transformations espérées dans la population.
- Les semi-fictions se basent sur des événements historiques, mais dramatisés à travers la façon de les raconter pour la télévision, la radio ou les films. C'est là une façon d'entrer en contact direct avec l'histoire d'une manière très agréable. Mais les demi-fictions demeurent tout de même... des fictions, au moins dans leurs présentations rhétorique et artistique.
- Les fictions, quant à elles, essaient de nous tirer hors de notre monde quotidien, dans des histoires qui trouveront écho en nous à cause de leurs similarités avec

notre propre vie. La fiction acquiert ainsi un énorme pouvoir psychologique. Elle demeure probablement la meilleure voie pour «ouvrir des potentialités» du genre de celles dont nous parlait Suzanne Lilar dans son analyse du jeu.

Notre question nous revient alors: les religions désirent-elles se faire présentes dans ces différents langages? Si oui, dans lesquels? Essaieront-elles de s'insérer dans un langage plus que dans les autres?

En ce qui concerne la première série de langage de persuasion explicite, je crois que l'approche la plus intéressante demeure le témoignage. Des témoins, personnes ou groupes, sont des ambassadeurs merveilleux d'une religion dans la sphère publique. Mais on doit prendre en compte un présupposé à leur succès: les témoins seront reçus par des auditoires s'ils sont intéressants, et pour cela ils se doivent de maîtriser la rhétorique de la parole publique. Il y a de la place pour toutes sortes de présence religieuse dans les médias, particulièrement en information, dans les relations publiques et même en publicité (pourquoi ne pas annoncer les services religieux, par exemple?). Le plus difficile demeurera certainement la propagande religieuse ouverte. De toute façon, on doit bien comprendre que toutes les religions devront, en tout temps, prendre en considération les dimensions rhétoriques et esthétiques de toute intervention publique dans les médias.

Ceci est particulièrement vrai pour les productions de l'imaginaire. Dans l'*entertainment* médiatique, le contenant apparaît clairement plus important que les contenus, ne l'oublions pas. Une étude faite il y a quelques années aux États-Unis d'Amérique a révélé que les contenus (appelé la «figure») comptait pour... 7% de la qualité de réception<sup>14</sup>; le reste (appelé le «ground») allait aux décors, aux figures, aux mains, aux yeux, aux gestes, aux couleurs, à la voix et ainsi de suite. Alors, les contenus se doivent d'être absolument parfaits pour que leur intégralité retienne leur 7% d'attention; mais on devrait mettre beaucoup de temps et d'efforts dans la présentation rhétorique et esthétique elle-même. Mentionnons seulement trois productions qui ont ainsi connu un immense impact en Amérique du Nord: «Doctor Marcus Welby» (sur les médecins sympathiques); «La petite

maison dans la prairie» (fait par les Mormons); «A Little Mosque in the Prairie» (en faveur de l'islam).

Cela entraîne plusieurs conséquences. D'abord, le personnel engagé pour le travail d'imagination dans les médias doit se préparer très bien. Les artistes, acteurs, réalisateurs et producteurs doivent bien maîtriser leur spécialité. Quant au personnel religieux engagé pour ces productions, il doit y être initié aussi, ou à tout le moins savoir accorder tout le respect nécessaire aux artistes.

En conclusion, je dirai que le meilleur positionnement que pourraient prendre les groupes religieux actuellement, ce serait de préparer d'excellents artistes professionnels capables de représenter leur vision spirituelle du monde et de la vie humaine dans les médias de l'*entertainment*. Ils deviendraient alors comme des ambassadeurs de leur propre religion dans la culture des médias de masse aujourd'hui.

## **Conclusion**

À titre de conclusion, je ferai un bref sommaire de ma proposition.

Nous nous souvenons que j'ai commencé ma présentation par rappeler les nombreuses craintes et l'agressivité qu'ont entretenues les religions envers le divertissement.

Pour créer une ouverture possible à cette situation, j'ai proposé une meilleure compréhension du jeu et des jeux à partir de quelques spécialistes. Nous avons compris que, contrairement à ce que tellement de personnes ont l'habitude de croire au sujet du jeu (un comportement enfantin), plusieurs penseurs sérieux expliquent plutôt comment le jeu se révèle être une activité très porteuse, révélant d'extraordinaires possibilités dans ses expressions artistiques et intellectuelles. Huizinga a même tenté de nous convaincre que les rituels de jeu étaient en fait très près du sacré. La discussion qui s'en est suivie à partir de sa position – avec Caillois, Fink et Lilar – nous a aidés à comprendre que le jeu se révèle en fait une merveilleuse base pour de possibles expressions d'un progrès spirituel dans la vie, ouvrant ainsi l'expérience médiatique vers d'extraordinaires potentialités, particulièrement dans les jeux de représentation.

Cela nous a révélé en même temps la possibilité de penser la présence du spirituel des religions dans le divertissement. Les religions peuvent être présentes dans l'*entertainment* médiatique en autant qu'elles n'essaient pas d'imposer leurs langages internes intellectuels et notionnels, mais qu'elles adaptent leurs langages à ceux de cette culture spécifique: particulièrement la nécessaire narrativité («story-telling»), l'usage de la narration comme indispensable en tout temps. Cela conduit à comprendre la capacité d'être présent dans les médias à partir principalement des témoins: soit des témoins réels (comme en information), soit des témoins inventés (comme dans la fiction). Voilà qui représente un essai de relation possible entre les religions et le divertissement.

Puis, après avoir expliqué le sens même à accorder à l'*entertainment* médiatique, j'ai mentionné au moins cinq dangers éthiques potentiels reliés aux médias.

Finalement, en vue de conclure sur une note positive, j'ai énoncé quelques conditions nécessaires pour une relation possiblement enrichissante entre les religions et l'*entertainment* médiatique: apprendre les langages des médias; connaître les expressions rhétoriques et esthétiques propres à la prise de parole publique; travailler dans les médias avec beaucoup de respect pour leurs artisans spécialistes; ne pas craindre l'imaginaire et la créativité.

J'espère vous avoir convaincu – en usant de persuasion explicite – de la faisabilité, et plus encore, de l'opportunité d'une présence des dimensions spirituelles proposées par les religions dans l'*entertainment* médiatique. Je dois vous rappeler après tout que – que les religions soient présentes ou non dans les médias – les créateurs qui travaillent dans l'*entertainment* médiatique proposent toujours leurs propres questionnements personnels sur la spiritualité, qu'on le veuille ou non; jour et nuit, ils exposent leurs produits rhétoriques et esthétiques qui se révèlent déjà prégnants de références directes ou indirectes à leurs cheminements spirituels au milieu des humains de toutes cultures et de toutes religions.

## Notes

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Nous avons publié récemment un livre précisément sur ce sujet: Guy MARCHESSAULT, *La foi chrétienne et le divertissement médiatique*. Québec, Presses de l'Université Laval, 2007, 390 p.
- <sup>2</sup> Umberto ECO, *Le nom de la rose*, 1980 (traduit en français en 1982).
- <sup>3</sup> William D. ROMANOWSKI, *Pop Culture Wars. Religion & the Role of Entertainment in American Life*. Downers Grove, Ill., InterVarsity Press, 1996, 379 p.
- <sup>4</sup> William D. ROMANOWSKI, *Pop Culture Wars. Religion & the Role of Entertainment in American Life*. Downers Grove, Ill., InterVarsity Press, 1996, 379 p.
- <sup>5</sup> Johan HUIZINGA, *Homo Ludens*. Beacon Press. 1971.
- <sup>6</sup> Roger CAILLOIS, *L'homme et le sacré*, Paris, Gallimard (Folio essais), 1950, 250 p.
- <sup>7</sup> Eugen FINK, *Spiel als Weltsymbol*. Stuttgart. 1960. *Le jeu comme symbole du monde*. Paris, Minuit, 1966. 244 p.
- <sup>8</sup> Frédéric ANTOINE, *Le grand malentendu: L'Église a-t-elle perdu la culture et les médias?* Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 2003. 223 p.
- <sup>9</sup> Exemple: Stewart M. HOOVER and Lynn SCHOFIELD CLARK, *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2002.
- <sup>10</sup> Olivier BURGELIN, *La communication de masse*. Paris, S.G.P., 1970. 300 p.
- <sup>11</sup> Michael J. WOLF, *The Entertainment Economy. How Mega-Media Forces Are Transforming Our Lives*. New York, Ramdon House, 1999. 314 p.
- <sup>12</sup> Neil POSTMAN, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York: Penguin Books, 1985. 184 p.
- <sup>13</sup> Guy DEBORD, *La société du spectacle*. Paris: Gallimard (folio), 1992. 211 p.
- <sup>14</sup> 7 % pour ce qui est dit, 39 % pour ce qui est transmis (voix, vocabulaire, rythme, etc.) et 55 % pour les expressions faciales et les mouvements du corps. Cf. A MERHABIAN, dans Pierre BABIN, *Langage et culture des médias*. Paris, Éd. Universitaires, 1991, p. 25.

## **Race, gender, religion: Constructions of the Other in mainstream Canadian news media**

Yasmin Jiwani  
Concordia University

**Abstract:** This presentation will focus on the representations of racialized and minoritized groups in the mass media. Drawing from the literature and existing research, I discuss how the relational dynamics underpinning these representations activate particular meanings and explanatory frameworks regarding ‘others.’ I pay particular attention the constructions of Muslims in the Canadian media underscoring how these representations pivot around assumed notions of the ‘reasonable’ citizen and the ‘deserving’ or worthy victim. I argue that such representations derive their potency from the bedrock of colonial imagery and are amplified in the current climate through such discursive devices as implicit contrasts, omissions and accentuated profiles. In illustrating these points, I draw upon examples prevalent in current news and popular media.

**Key words:** *Media, Muslims, Canada, representations*

**Résumé :** Cette présentation se concentrera sur les représentations des races et des groupes minoritaires dans les médias. Inspirée par la littérature et les recherches, j'explique comment la dynamique relationnelle qui sous-tend ces représentations active une signification particulière des cadres explicatifs concernant les « autres ». Je paie une attention particulière aux représentations des musulmans dans les médias canadiens, articulant combien ces représentations pivotent autour de notions présumées du peuple «raisonnable» ou de « la victime qui mérite son sort ». J'affirme que telles représentations tirent leur puissance du fondement colonial et sont amplifiées dans le climat actuel par le biais des mécaniques discursives comme les contrastes sous-entendus, les omissions et les profils soutenus. En illustrant ces points, je confirme des exemples répandus dans les nouvelles et les médias en général.

**Mots clés :** *Médias, musulmans, Canada, représentations*



*The power to see while remaining unseen, the power to put others into discourse while remaining unspoken, is a particularly effective form of power. (Fiske, 1996:217)*

## **Introduction**

I begin this presentation with an acknowledgement of the First Nations' ownership of this land. I want to contextualize this acknowledgement by recounting a story, a story based on an experience that I recently encountered. When Ward Churchill, a well-known Aboriginal scholar, came to deliver a presentation at Concordia University, an Australian woman in the audience asked him why Canadians do not thank the First Nations people at the outset of any ceremony, presentation, public lecture or gathering. Churchill replied that thanking the First Nations would be akin to someone invading his apartment, staying there despite not being wanted and constantly thanking him for being there! Obviously that is not my intent here. Rather, what I would like to do is acknowledge the space that I am occupying as belonging to the First Nations of this land—land that has been colonized and converted into a white settler society.

There are two reasons why I am invoking the First Nations here. First, it is to recognize and draw attention to their absence and, second, to illustrate the issue of power. My point of departure is that one cannot have an authentic dialogue in a situation of unequal power relations. And I would argue that inequality is what textures the mediated and virtual-reality worlds as well as the empirical, material conditions in which we live. Within the media landscape, the dominance of the white gaze is communicated through the techniques of exnomination, universalization and naturalization. Exnomination, as John Gabriel (1998:13) defines it, consists of the “power not to be named.” Through naturalization, the dominance of whiteness and the white gaze is rendered natural and, common-sensical. Through universalization, the norms of whiteness are taken for granted as constitutive of normativity. When I speak of whiteness, I am not referring to skin colour as much as I am referencing the “field of power” that whiteness communicates (see Hage, 1998). It is a “strategic deployment of power” (Fiske, 1996:42). This power remains unnamed; it is the backdrop against which all Others stand out. Yet it is that same power that manifests itself through the categories and classifications that are imposed on the rest of the world, imagined and

otherwise (see Foucault, 1978/1995). This power translates into particular ways of seeing (Berger, 1972), an *oculus mundi*, as Davies, Nandy and Sardar (1993) have identified it in their historical analysis of Western racism.

In speaking of representations of the Other that prevail in the mainstream media, we need to bear in mind the power of that media to define Others, delimit the boundaries of the debate concerning these Others and to inculcate within these Others and in the Self (those that do the defining) notions and concepts about where they fit in the normative order. Himani Bannerji (1986) aptly conceptualizes these aspects of the mass media as the power to describe and prescribe. In his analysis, Stuart Hall conceptualizes this power as anchored in the stock of common-sense knowledge that is neither totally rational or systematic, but rather incorporates a diverse multitude of sometimes contradictory bits of information gleaned from both a historical and accumulated knowledge as well as from contemporary events that are filtered through pre-existing lenses. As Hall neatly summarizes it,

[C]ontemporary forms of common sense are shot through with the debris and traces of previous, more developed ideological systems; and their reference point is what passes, without exception, as the wisdom of *our* particular age and society, overcast with the glow of traditionalism. It is precisely its 'spontaneous' quality, its transparency, its 'naturalness,' its refusal to be made to examine the premises on which it is founded, its resistance to change or to correction, its effect of instant recognition, and the closed circle in which it moves which makes common sense, at one and the same time, 'spontaneous,' ideological and unconscious. You cannot learn, through common sense, *how things are*: you can only discover *where they fit* into the existing scheme of thing. In this way, its very taken-for-grantedness is what establishes it as a medium in which its own premises and presuppositions are being rendered invisible by its apparent transparency. (Hall, 1979:325-326).

The mainstream media thus draw on this common-sense in order to 'make sense' of the events that are reported on. However, these events are reported on based on previous frameworks of meaning. In other words, there is always a degree of resonance in order to make the unknown fit

into the ‘existing scheme of things.’ This framework then relies on previously constituted filters through which Others are seen. However, these filters are not so transparent as to render the media devoid of any legitimacy. As Hackett and Zhao (1998) demonstrate, there is always a semblance of ‘balance’ and ‘objectivity.’ Nonetheless, these are framed within the overarching ideological parameters of a filter grounded in a taken-for-granted stock of common sense knowledge.

In his seminal work on Orientalism, Edward Said lays bare the filter that operates in the Western media with regard to its conceptions and perceptions of the East. As he puts it, this Orientalist frame

is an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction (the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident) but also of a whole series of “interests” which, by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains; it *is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world...(Said 1979:12).

The techniques and technologies by which the mainstream media incorporate difference then reveal not only the power of whiteness—with respect to its gaze, its ordering, typification and classification of these Others—but also display the hegemonic ends to which such representations are intended. To put it plainly, the methods of incorporating difference pivot on notions of how Otherness is constructed and demonstrates the utility of these representations in reconstructing representations of the Self. The Self/Other dichotomy prevails and is produced and reproduced through numerous media formats. Hence, how Others are seen is then a reflection of how the Self is conceptualized and embodied.

Whereas Said was interested in tracing representations of the East and its constructed nature within a body of theory, politics and practice in Orientalism, Stuart Hall has focused his work on the notion of the racialized Other within the context of postcolonial studies in Britain. Hall (1990) argues that in the colonial period, representations of the Other cohered around particular

power coordinates within a base grammar of race. These representations

(1) were polarized around fixed relations of subordination and domination. (2) Their stereotypes were grouped around the poles of ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ natural species. (3) Both were displaced from the ‘language’ of history into the language of Nature. Natural physical signs and racial characteristics became the unalterable signifiers of inferiority. Subordinate ethnic groups and classes appeared, not as the objects of particular historical relations (the slave trade, European colonisation, the active underdevelopment of the ‘underdeveloped’ societies), but as the given qualities of an inferior *breed*. Relations, secured by economic, social, political and military domination were transformed and ‘naturalised’ into an order of *rank* ascribed by Nature. (1990:14)

Here we see the conjoining of material power with symbolic power—the power to define that is undergirded by the hard power of the state. Unequal relations, then, are pivotal in maintaining the supremacy of one over the Other, and in the colonial situation, of naturalizing these differences by referencing biological tropes.

### **Contemporary Media Representations**

Representations of racialized Others in contemporary media continue this legacy of colonialism in terms of invoking a grammar of race. Numerous studies have detailed the stereotypical ways in which racial minority groups are under-represented and portrayed (e.g., Beltrán 2002; Bogle, 1989; Cottle, 1992, 2000; Curry and Valdivia, 2002; Fiske, 1996; Fish, 1997; Greer and Jewkes, 2005; Jhalley and Lewis, 1992; Miller, 1980; Moorti, 2002; Ross and Playdon, 2001; Shaheen, 2001). As I have outlined elsewhere (Jiwani, 2006), a plethora of Canadian studies have documented similar findings (e.g. Armour, 1984; Buchignani & Indra with Srivastava, 1985; Creese and Peterson, 1996; Dunn & Mahtani, 2001; Folsom, 2004; Hier and Greenberg, 2002; Henry and Tator, 2002; Karim, 2000; Khakhi and Prasad, 1988; Indra, 1979; Mahtani, 2001; Murray, 2002; Scanlon, 1977; Wortley, 2002).

Fleraz and Kunz's (2001) treatment of the subject offers a useful schemata. They argue that

representations of racialized minority groups cohere around five thematic areas: “minorities as invisible, minorities as stereotypes, minorities as problem people, minorities as whitewashed, and minorities as adornments” (p.140). In the first instance, the invisibility of minority groups is most apparent when they are backdrops against which the actions of white male hero are profiled. Seen in this light, they become accoutrements or part of the setting rather than individuals or communities featured in their own right. As stereotypical representations, racialized people are often depicted in ways that conform to prevailing and historically-inscribed caricatures. The Asian geisha girl, the black mammy, the Indian babu, and the Middle Eastern belly dancer echo some of these more common stereotypical figures. Minorities who are “whitewashed” are common in advertisements of commodities where they are made to speak like and act like members of the dominant culture. They embody an ethic of assimilation. Finally, “minorities as adornments” refers both to the decorative use of minority figures in the media as well as the packaging and commodification of aspects of minority culture and identity. Lalvani (1995) refers to this as enabling the consumption of the exotic by delimiting or neutralizing aspects that are deemed to be threatening. Fish (1997) conceptualizes this as a form of ‘boutique’ multiculturalism, whereby particular aspects of minority cultures are periodically taken out of the closet and celebrated.

Fleras and Kunz’s thematic clusters provide a descriptive of map of where representations of racialized peoples are likely to be concentrated. Their schema complements Teun van Dijk’s extensive analysis of verbal and media discourses concerning racialized groups. In his analysis of the press, van Dijk (1987; 1989; 1991) argues that representations of minority groups can be organized along an ideological grid. The grid pivots on positive self-representations and negative Other representations. In other words, an ‘us’ and ‘them’ distinction is operative in determining where in the grid representations of racialized groups are likely to be located. Hence, if ‘we’ are law-abiding, ‘they’ are oriented towards crime. This grid works in several domains: economic, cultural and social. Within the economic order, minorities are construed as stealing jobs or being unfairly favoured through equity laws; within the social order, they are perceived as threats in destabilizing and overturning normative codes; and within the cultural order, they are construed as threats in terms of their inability to assimilate and their imposition of their own cultural norms.

The construction of racialized Others as threats in all of these domains is clearly apparent in the Canadian media. Several key incidents within the last decade alone have perpetuated these constructions. In the section that follows, I address some of these vis-à-vis research that I have conducted on the Canadian press. My examples pay particular attention to representations that intersect along the axes of race, religion and gender.

### **Race, Gender and Religion in the Canadian Press**

Before detailing the analysis of racialized representations in the Canadian press, I need to make clear that the Canadian mediascape is a highly concentrated one (Shade, 2010; Winter, 1997, 2002; Winseck, 2002). Only a few corporations own most of the major media organizations. For example, CanWest Global owns most of the newspapers with circulation in the major cities; similarly, of the two national dailies, CanWest Global owns one while Globemedia owns the other. CanWest's biases have been well-documented with respect to the corporation's attempt to impose a standardized editorial across the country, its firing of editors that would not comply to this standardization, and its pro-Israel bias. Izzy Asper, the founder and father of the current owner, Leonard Asper, has openly stated that "anti-Israel bias is a cancer effecting Western media organizations" (Block, 2002). Similarly, a one-time reporter for the *National Post*, the CanWest-owned daily, commented after she had resigned that "when CanWest, controlled by the Asper family, acquired the paper from Conrad Black, I no longer dared to express sympathy for Palestinians" (Pearson, 2003).

Hence, the major media as in the daily papers like the *National Post* are already primed towards selecting and favouring particular kinds of reporting and coverage. Add to this the reliance of Canadian media on newswire services, which are themselves concentrated in the hands of a few powerful corporations (see Rantanan, 2004; Muscati, 2002), and the biases become pronounced if not more explicit. This suggests that even though there may be reporters who are sympathetic or who embrace alternative ways of defining and covering a situation, most of the reportage will likely conform to pre-existing biases and patterns. Said (1981) notes the occurrence of these entrenched patterns of reporting in his renowned work, *Covering Islam*.

Reinforcing these biases in content are structural issues such as the constant pressures to generate news in a 24/7 cycle, which often means that the news becomes more like infotainment than information (Thussu, 2003). Internal constraints such as the socialization of journalists and reporters, the division of labour and coverage along particular ‘beats’ and the hierarchical nature of the news organization all contribute to exacerbating if not accentuating existing biases (Bennett, 2003; Shoemaker and Reese, 1996).

New coverage also tends to employ routinized methods of gathering and reporting stories so that particular frameworks become entrenched over time. As Entman elaborates, frames involve

*selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution....* Those frames that employ more culturally resonant terms have the greatest potential for influence. They use words and images highly salient in the culture, which is to say *noticeable, understandable, memorable, and emotionally charged*. (2003:417, italics in the original).

These frames are economical in that they can be invoked to organize information into “packages for consciousness” that make instant sense (see Hallin, 1986:13). With regard to Islam and Muslims, it is apparent that these “packages” and “frames” organize information in ways that privilege an ‘us’ and cast ‘them’ as threats to the social, economic and cultural order—frames that are anchored in Orientalism.

Corresponding to Hall’s (1990) grammar of race, Orientalism also embodies similar power coordinates in that within the grid of Orientalism, the Orient is deemed homogeneous, static (or unchanging), traditional and barbaric (using the register of development rhetoric), and inferior. The Orient, as Said (1979) observed, remains outside of time and history. These features have and continue to permeate representations of Arabs and Muslims in the popular media (see Boggs and Pollard, 2006; Shaheen, 1984, 2003; Wilkins and Downing, 2002) as well as the news media (Karim, 2000; Nayak, 2006; Mouammar, 1986; Muscati, 2002; Odartey-Wellington, 2004; Parameswaran, 2006; Zelizer and Allan, 2002).

### **Enter the ‘barbaric’ Muslim man**

In examining Muslim representations in the Canadian press in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, it was apparent that Orientalist imagery predominated the coverage. Writing immediately after on September 12, popular *Globe and Mail* columnist Margaret Wentz penned the following:

Those who are responsible are most likely men from remote desert lands. Men from ancient tribal cultures built on blood and revenge. Men whose unshakable beliefs and implacable hatreds go back many centuries farther than the United States and its young ideas of democracy, pluralism and freedom. (Wentz, 2001:A1)

As I have detailed elsewhere (2009b), the image of the barbaric Muslim male has been a common phenomenon in both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ media, i.e., the news media and entertainment programming. Even prior to 9/11, representations of Arabs and Muslims (the two are often conflated in the media) cohered around stereotypical features of the gluttonous and lecherous Arab sheik, the veiled and erotic Middle Eastern woman and the hot-headed, impulsive and reckless Muslim young man (Shaheen, 2003). Since 9/11, though, these representations have tended to congeal around the construction of Muslim men as terrorists, a construction further entrenched by the Madrid train bombing on March 11, 2004 and the London bombings of July 2007.

Inderpal Grewal (2003) has observed that:

the transnational figure of the ‘terrorist’ suggests that such a figure is beyond redemption and thus is of such high risk to the nation and the state as to be incarcerated immediately or to be destroyed. The flip side of this danger is thus the ‘security’ and happiness and freedom to be felt by the incarceration of such bodies designated as ‘risk producing.’ (Grewal, 2003: 539)

The ‘terrorist’ figure thus condenses the perceived threat to the social order. The bombing of the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon on September 11 symbolized an attack on the economic and military nerve centers of the American social and economic order. Bonnie Mann



(2006) has pointed out how the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center symbolized the masculine power of the US, which was subsequently ‘castrated’ by the bombings. Similarly, Nayak (2006) contends that ‘the war on terror’ is reflective of the US’s hypermasculinity, in that the response of invading Afghanistan was predicated on masculinist retaliation.

My research focusing on the coverage of the events of September 11, 2001 in *The Globe and Mail* (Jiwani, 2004, 2005, 2009a, 2009/2010) reveals that the tropes of Orientalism were very much in effect and were used to filter the coverage. Barbaric Muslim men predominated the landscape, complimented by the abject Afghan and Muslim woman.

### **Enter the abject Muslim victim**

In their analysis of the western mainstream media’s coverage of the war on Afghanistan, Stabile and Kumar (2005) draw attention to the play of a ‘protection scenario’ based on the logic that “women, like the penetrable, feminized territory of the nation-state, must be protected from the predatory advances of some real or imaginary enemy” (p.770). Within this scenario, the hero protects the helpless victim and fights against the villain. The hypermasculinity identified earlier becomes the basis on which the hero/protector role was played out by the US in the media, and, as Stabile and Kumar (2005) demonstrate, this role became especially meaningful in the post-9/11 context with the elevation of Afghan women into the role of quintessential victims needing to be rescued.

In commenting on the West’s construction of Muslim women, Miriam Cooke notes that a logic of empire underpins these representations. This logic, she reasons,

genders and separates subject peoples so that the men are the Other and the women are civilizable. To defend our universal civilization we must rescue the women. To rescue these women we must attack these men. These women will be rescued not because they are more “ours” than “theirs” but rather because they will have become more “ours” through the rescue mission. [...] In the Islamic context, the negative stereotyping of the religion as inherently misogynist provides ammunition for the attack on the uncivilized brown men.” (p.468)

Within the Canadian landscape, the construction of the abject Afghan women as victim has been

utilized strategically to harness support for the country's involvement in Afghanistan and for shoring up Canadian military reinforcements in the region (see Jiwani, 2009a). It has also been used to legitimize a groundswell of opposition against the hijab and sharia laws (see Razack, 2008).

The hijab has become a symbol freighted with numerous meanings. Despite evidence to the contrary (see especially Hoodfar, 1993; Scott, 2007), the hijab has been construed as an all-encompassing mark of gender oppression within Islam. While much has been written on the hijab from a critical perspective (e.g. Cloud, 2004; Franks, 2003; Macdonald, 2006, Vivian, 1999), the obsession with it symbolizes not only its semiotic value as a sign that can be harnessed to portray the barbaric and traditional stereotypes of Islam, but more importantly to demonstrate how it remains a threat to perceived Western notions of gender equality and liberty. Harnessed to the discourse of development and now 'democracy,' the hijab, comments Yeğenoğlu,

makes it a convenient signifier for the contending parties to fight out their differences through manipulating this highly charged symbol. The veil is thus transformed into a medium through which the male subjects of the nation can articulate their desires and fears, but, more importantly, can assert "national" difference. However, the very construction of national difference is possible only through the mediation of woman, a mediation which nevertheless has to be repressed. (1998:126)

Within Quebec, the obsession with the hijab has come across most clearly in the events leading up to and during the hearings of the Blue Ribbon Commission on "reasonable accommodation" in 2007. These hearings, as I have noted elsewhere (RaceLink, 2008) fueled anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiment in the province. In essence, they generated a climate of racism that, in turn, provoked considerable hostility and hate crimes against Muslims, Arabs and other Middle-Eastern 'looking' individuals.

More recently, the veil has come into the public limelight again, this time ushered in by *The Globe and Mail's* week-long special series Behind the Veil: Inside the Lives of Afghan Women,

which began on September 19, 2009. Soon thereafter, the Muslim Canadian Congress issued its statement urging the government to ban the burqa and niqab (the full face covering) (Canadian Press, October 7, 2009). Congress spokeswoman Farzana Hassan is quoted as saying, “If a government claims to uphold equality between men and women, there is no reason for them to support a practice that marginalizes women.” The practice of wearing the burqa or the niqab is certainly not widespread in Canada. One can only surmise that its topicality as an issue of public concern stems from the combination of the widely publicized series *Behind the Veil* and the subsequent reported reactions of the Muslim Canadian Congress, a minority group that by no means represents the entire Muslim population in Canada.

*Behind the Veil* consists of a multimedia series, accompanied by a website, replete with interviews, photographs and background details on Afghan women. The site also has interactive features that allow interested audiences to participate in conversations with ‘experts.’ Led by Jessica Leeder, the website offers viewers insights combined with first-hand interviews with ten ‘average’ Afghan women in Kandahar.

The series reinvokes the tropes of imperial feminism (Amos and Parmar, 1984), demonstrating the benevolence of and equality enjoyed by Western women as compared to their oppressed Eastern sisters. It also replays the same motifs that were in effect at the time when the invasion of Afghanistan was first planned and executed by the US government and its coalition of allies. Again, as Meyda Yeğenoğlu eloquently remarks,

[T]he declaration of an emancipated status for the Western woman is contingent upon the representation of the Oriental woman as her devalued other and this enables Western woman to identify and preserve the boundaries of self for herself. [...] To be Western here implies feeling that one is entitled to universalize one’s particular achievements and interests. The effacement/erasure of the particularity of Western women in the name of universality has the effect of legitimizing the colonial-feminist discourse as an act of generosity and as an act of conferring upon Middle East women the privilege of participating in Western women’s universalism rather than a denial and negation of difference. (1998:102)

The tropes of an imperial feminism are clearly apparent in reporter Jessica Leeder's introduction to the Behind the Veil series. She opens with the following statements:

While female correspondents working in strict Islamic countries face many barriers that our male colleagues do not, we often gain a rare upper hand when it comes to accessing local women. In the conservative Afghan south, cultural and religious practices prevent females from talking to males who are not their relatives. That means the stories of what it is like to be a woman in this almost pre-historic slice of Afghan society have largely gone untold. (Transcribed from the introduction: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/behind-the-veil/>)

Leeder then continues her introduction by offering us, the viewers, tantalizing bits of information that describe what we are about to see and how 'we' will get to meet with all of these women, including a 'child-bride.'

There are many issues that could be discussed in length about this series. However, what I wish to underscore here is that the same tropes of Orientalism are in effect and filter the kind of coverage we receive. In these stories, as in others that I have previously examined, the ideological grid that van Dijk describes continues to structure these representations so that 'we' are cast as civilized whereas 'they' remain uncivilized, pre-modern and barbaric. Muslim women, in these instances, are victims deserving to be rescued.

## **Conclusion**

I began this paper by referencing the issues of power imbalances and inequalities as they are brought to bear on attempts to structure authentic dialogue. I have argued that it is not possible to engage in such dialogue when the power to define and the power to name (and conversely the power not to be named) are located only in the hands of a few, and that those who are observed and scrutinized remain outside the boundaries of the dialogue.

In closing, I wish to draw on Sherene Razack's (2004) apt description of the current imagined landscape, which, she remarks, is populated by three central figures: the barbaric Muslim male,

the “imperilled” Muslim woman and the white male hero/rescuer. In this cast of three, the individual with the most power is the one who defines the situation and characterizes the roles of the Others. That aside, the power to define in the contemporary situation is also undergirded by a material power to annihilate those who do not play their roles or do not fit into the larger scheme of things.

## References

- Amos, V. and Pratibha P. (1984) "Challenging Imperial Feminism." *Feminist Review* 17: 3-19.
- Armour, M. (1984) "The Historical Context of Racism in Canada." *Currents* 2, no. 1: 8-13.
- Bahdi, R. (2003) "No Exit: Racial Profiling and Canada's War against Terrorism." *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 41, no. 2 & 3: 293-316.
- Bannerji, H. (1986) "Now You See Us/Now You Don't." *Video Guide* 8, no. 40 (1986): 1-4.
- Barthes, R. (1973) *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. London: Paladin.
- Beltrán, M. C. (2002) "The Hollywood Latina Body as Site of Social Struggle: Media Constructions of Stardom and Jennifer Lopez's 'Cross-over Butt'." *Quarterly Review Film & Video*, no. 19: 71-86.
- Bennett, L.W. (2003) *News, the Politics of Illusion*. Fifth edition. White Plains, New York: Longman.
- Berger, J. (1972) *Ways of Seeing*. London and Harmondsworth: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin.
- Block, I. (2002, Oct. 31) "Canwest Chief Attacks 'Cancer' in the Media. Anti-Israel Bias 'Destroying Credibility.' Fundamental Precepts of Honest Reporting Have Been Abandoned, Israel Asper Says." *The Montreal Gazette*, A3
- Boggs, C. and T. Pollard. (2006) "Hollywood and the Spectacle of Terrorism." *New Political Science* 28, no. 3: 335-51.
- Bogle, D. (1989) *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. New York: Continuumd.
- Buchignani, N., D. Indra, and R. Srivastava (1985) *Continuous Journey: A Social History of South Asians in Canada*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.
- Canadian Press (2009, Oct. 7) "Muslim Group Moves to Ban Burka." *Globe and Mail*.
- Cloud, D. L. (2004) "'To Veil the Threat of Terror': Afghan Women and the <Clash of Civilizations> in the Imagery of the U.S. War on Terrorism." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90, no. 3: 285-306.
- Cooke, M. (2002) "Saving Brown Women." *Signs* 28, no. 1: 468-70.
- Cottle, S. (1992) "'Race', Racialization and the Media: A Review and Update of Research." *Sage Race Relations Abstracts* 17, no. 2: 41-57.
- Cottle, S. (ed.) (2000) *Ethnic Minorities and the Media*. Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Creese, G. and L. Peterson. (1996) "Making the News, Racializing Chinese Canadians." *Studies in Political Economy*, no. 51: 117-45.
- Curry, R. and A. N. Valdivia. (2002) "Xuxa at the Borders of U.S. TV: Checked for Gender, Race, and National Identity." In *Sex & Money: Feminism and Political Economy in the Media*, edited by Eileen R. & Ellen Riordan Meehan. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Davies, M. W., A. Nandy, and Z. Sardar (1993) *Barbaric Others: A Manifesto on Western Racism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Dunn, K. and M. Mhatani (2001) "'Adjusting the Colour Bars:' Media Representations of Ethnic Minorities under Australian and Canadian Multiculturalisms." Vancouver Centre of Excellence.
- Entman, R. M. (2003) "Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House's Frame after 9/11." *Political Communication* 20, no. 4: 415-32.
- Fish, S. (1997) "Boutique Multiculturalism, or Why Liberals Are Incapable of Thinking About Hate Speech." *Critical Inquiry*, no. 23: 378-95.
- Fiske, J. (1996) *Media Matters: Race and Gender in U.S. Politics*. Revised ed. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.

- Fleras, A. and J. L. Kunz (2001) *Media and Minorities, Representing Diversity in a Multicultural Canada*. Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.
- Folson, R. B. (2004) "Representation of the Immigrant." In *Calculated Kindness: Global Restructuring, Immigration and Settlement in Canada*, edited by Rose Baaba Folson, 21-32. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.
- Foucault, M. (1978/1995) *Discipline & Punish, the Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Franks, M. A. (2003) "Obscene Undersides: Women and Evil between the Taliban and the United States." *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 18, no. 1: 135-56.
- Gabriel, J. (1998) *Whitewash: Racialized Politics and the Media*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Gitlin, T. (1979) "News as Ideology and Contested Area: Toward a Theory of Hegemony, Crisis and Opposition." *Socialist Review* 9, no. 6: 11-54.
- Greer, Ch. and Y. Jewkes (2005) "Extremes of Otherness: Media Images of Social Exclusion." *Social Justice* 32, no. 1: 20-32.
- Grewal, I. (2003) "Transnational America: Race, Gender and Citizenship after 9/11." *Social Identities* 9, no. 4: 535-61.
- Hackett, R. A., and Y. Zhao (1998) *Sustaining Democracy? Journalism and the Politics of Objectivity*. Toronto: Garamond Press.
- Hage, G. (1998) *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*. New York and Australia: Routledge and Pluto Press.
- Hall, S. (1997) "The Work of Representations." In *Representation, Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, edited by Stuart Hall, 15-74. London: Sage in association with The Open University.
- Hall, S. (1990) "The Whites of Their Eyes, Racist Ideologies and the Media." In *The Media Reader*, edited by Manuel Alvarado and John O. Thompson, 9-23. London: British Film Institute.
- Hall, S. (1979) "Culture, the Media and the 'Ideological Effect'." In *Mass Communication and Society*, edited by James Curran, Michael Gurevitch and Janet Woollacott, 315-47. London: E. Arnold in association with The Open University Press.
- Hallin, D. C. (1986) "We Keep America on Top of the World." In *Watching Television*, edited by Todd Gitlin, 9-41. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Henry, F. and C. Tator (2003) "Racial Profiling in Toronto: Discourses of Domination, Mediation, and Opposition." Toronto: Canadian Race Relations Foundation.
- Henry, F. and C. Tator (2002) *Discourses of Domination: Racial Bias in the Canadian English-Language Press*. Toronto, London, Buffalo: University of Toronto Press.
- Hier, S. and J. Greenberg (2002) "News Discourse and the Problematization of Chinese Migration to Canada." In *Discourses of Domination: Racial Bias in the Canadian English-Language Press*, edited by Frances Henry and Carol Tator, 138-62. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Hoodfar, H. (1993) "Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: The Persistence of Colonial Images of Muslim Women." *Resources for Feminist Research* 22, no. 3/4: 5-18.
- Indra, D. M. (1979) "South Asian Stereotypes in the Vancouver Press." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2, no. 2: 164-87.
- Jhally, S. and J. Lewis (1992) *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream*. San Francisco, CA: Westview Press.
- Jiwani, Y. (2010) "Race(ing) the Nation: Media and Minorities." In *Mediascapes, New Patterns in Communication*, (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), edited by Leslie Regan Shade, 271-86. Toronto: Nelson.
- Jiwani, Y. (2009) "Soft Power – Policing the Border through Canadian TV Crime Drama." In *Media and Power*, edited by Jeffery Klaehn. New York: Peter Lang (forthcoming).



- Jiwani, Y. (2009a) "Helpless Maidens and Chivalrous Knights: Afghan Women in the Canadian Press." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 78, no. 2: 728-44.
- Jiwani, Y. (2009b) "Covering Canada's Role in the 'War on Terror'." In *Mediating Canadian Politics*, edited by Shannon Sampert and Linda Trimble, 294-316. Toronto: Pearson, 2009b.
- Jiwani, Y. (editor) (2008) *RaceLink*, A Quasi-Journal. For information concerning the Reasonable Accommodation hearings, see the issue of *RaceLink* available at <http://artsandscience1.concordia.ca/comm/faculty/jiwani.html>
- Jiwani, Y. (2006) *Discourses of Denial: Mediations of Race, Gender and Violence*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Jiwani, Y. (2005) "The Great White North Encounters September 11: Race, Gender, and Nation in Canada's National Daily, *the Globe and Mail*." *Social Justice* 32, no. 4: 50-68.
- Jiwani, Y. (2004) "Gendering Terror: Representations of the Orientalized Body in Quebec's Post-September 11 English-Language Press." *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 13, no. 3: 265-91.
- Karim, H. K. (2000) *Islamic Peril*. Montreal, Quebec: Black Rose Books.
- Katz, J. (1987) "What Makes Crime 'News'?" *Media, Culture and Society* 9: 47-75.
- Khaki, A. and K. Prasad (1988) "Depiction and Perception: Native Indians and Visible Minorities in the Media." Vancouver, BC: The Ad Hoc Committee for Better Race Relations.
- Kitzinger, J. (2000) "Media Templates: Patterns of Association and the (Re)Construction of Meaning over Time." *Media, Culture & Society* 22, no. 1: 61-84.
- Lalvani, S. (1995) "Consuming the Exotic Other." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12, no. 3: 263-86.
- Lenk, H-M. (2000) "The Case of Emilie Ouimet, News Discourse on Hijab and the Construction of Quebecois National Identity." In *Anti-Racist Feminism*, edited by Agnes Calliste and Sefa George J. Dei, 73-88. Halifax: Fernwood.
- Macdonald, M. (2006) "Muslim Women and the Veil, Problems of Image and Voice in Media Representations." *Feminist Media Studies* 6, no. 1: 7-23.
- Mahtani, M. and A. Mountz (2002) "Immigration to British Columbia: Media Representations and Public Opinion." *RIIM, Research Centre on Immigration and Integration in the Metropolis, Working Paper Series*.
- Mahtani, M. (2001) "Representing Minorities: Canadian Media and Minority Identities." *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 33, no. 3: 93-133.
- Mamdani, M. (2004) *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War and the Roots of Terror*. New York: Pantheon.
- Mann, B. (2006) "How America Justifies Its War: A Modern/Postmodern Aesthetics of Masculinity and Sovereignty." *Hypatia* 21, no. 4: 147-63.
- Miller, R. M. (ed.) (1980) *The Kaleidoscopic Lens: How Hollywood View Ethnic Groups*. Englewood, NJ: Ozer.
- Moorti, S. (2002) *Color of Rape: Gender and Race in Television's Public Spheres*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Mouammar, M. (1986) "The Toronto Star and the Canadian Arab Federation." *Currents: Readings in Race Relations* 3, no. 3: 20-21.
- Murray, C. (2002) "Silent on the Set: Cultural Diversity and Race in English Canadian TV Drama." Prepared for the Strategic Research and Analysis (SRA), Strategic Policy and Research Department of Canadian Heritage.
- Muscatti, S. A. (2002) "Arab/Muslim 'Otherness': The Role of Racial Constructions in the Gulf War and



- the Continuing Crisis with Iraq." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 22, no. 1: 131-48.
- Nayak, M. (2006) "Orientalism and 'Saving' Us State Identity after 9/11." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 8, no. 1: 42-61.
- Odartey-Wellington, F. (2004) "The Al-Qaeda Sleeper Cell That Never Was: The Canadian News Media, State Security Apparatus, and 'Operation Thread'." MA Thesis, Concordia University.
- Pearson, P. (2003, Apr 19) "See No Evil, No More." *The Globe and Mail*, A19.
- Parameswaran, R. (2006) "Military Metaphors, Masculine Modes, and Critical Commentary, Deconstructing Journalists' Inner Tales of September 11." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 30, no. 1: 42-64.
- Rantanen, T. (2004) "European News Agencies and Their Sources in the Iraq War Coverage." In *Reporting War, Journalism in Wartime*, edited by Stuart Allan and Barbie Zelizer, 301-14. Oxon and New York: Routledge.
- Razack, S. (2008) *Casting out, the Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Razack, S. (2004) "Imperilled Muslim Women, Dangerous Muslim Men and Civilised Europeans: Legal and Social Responses to Forced Marriages." *Feminist Legal Studies* 12, no. 2: 129-74.
- Ross, K. and P. Playdon (eds.) (2001) *Black Marks: Minority Ethnic Audiences and Media*. Aldershot, Burlington, Singapore, Sydney: Ashgate.
- Said, E. (1981) *Covering Islam: How the Media and Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Said, E. (1978) *Orientalism*. New York: Random House.
- Scanlon, J. (1977) "The Sikhs of Vancouver." In *Ethnicity and the Media*, 193-261. Paris: Unesco Press.
- Scott, J. W. (2007) *The Politics of the Veil*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Shade, L. R. and M. Lithgow (2010) "The Cultures of Democracy: How Ownership and Public Participation Shape Canada's Media Systems." In *Mediascapes: New Patterns in Canadian Communication*, edited by Leslie Regan Shade, 200-20. Toronto: Nelson.
- Shaheen, J. (1984) *The TV Arab*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.
- Shaheen, J. G. (2003) "Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People." *The Annals of the American Academy* 588: 171-93.
- Shoemaker, P. J., and S. D. Reese (1996) *Mediating the Message, Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content*. White Plains, New York: Longman.
- Stabile, C. A., and D. Kumar (2005) "Unveiling Imperialism: Media, Gender and the War on Afghanistan." *Media, Culture & Society* 27, no. 5: 765-82.
- Thussu, D. K. (2003) "Live TV and Bloodless Deaths: War, Infotainment and 24/7 News." In *War and the Media*, edited by Daya Kishan Thussu and Des Freedman, 117-32. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Todd, S. (1998) "Veiling the 'Other', Unveiling Our 'Selves': Reading Media Images of the Hijab Psychoanalytically to Move Beyond Tolerance." *Canadian Journal of Education* 23, no. 4: 438-51.
- van Dijk, T. A. (1993) *Elite Discourse and Racism*. Vol. 6, *Race and Ethnic Relations*. Newbury Park, California: Sage.
- van Dijk, T. A. (1991) *Racism and the Press*. London and New York: Routledge, 1991.
- van Dijk, T. A. (1989) "Mediating Racism: The Role of the Media in the Reproduction of Racism." In *Language, Power and Ideology*, edited by Ruth Wodak, 199-226. Amsterdam: J. Beryamin Publishing Co.
- van Dijk, T. A. (1987) *Communicating Racism, Ethnic Prejudice in Thought and Talk*. Newbury Park,

CA: Sage Publications.

- Vivian, B. (1999) "The Veil and the Visible." *Western Journal of Communication* 63, no. 2: 115-39.
- Wente, M. (2002) "US Will Never Be the Same." *The Globe and Mail*, September 12 2001, A1.
- Wilkins, K and J. Downing (2002) "Mediating Terrorism: Text and Protest in Interpretations of *the Siege*." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19, no. 4: 419-37.
- Winter, J. (1997) *Democracy's Oxygen: How Corporations Control the News*. Montreal: Black Rose.
- Winter, J. (2002) *Media Think*. Montreal, London & New York: Black Rose Books.
- Winseck, D. (2002) "Netscapes of Power; Convergence, Consolidation and Power in the Canadian Mediascape." *Media, Culture & Society* 24: 795-819.
- Zelizer, B. and S. Allan (eds.) (2002) *Journalism after September 11*. New York: Routledge.

**Recovering the past in *Jodhaa Akbar*:  
Masculinities, femininities and cultural politics in Bombay cinema**

Shahnaz Khan  
Wilfrid Laurier University

**Abstract:** *Jodha Akbar* is a film which historicizes the love story between a 16th century Muslim Emperor, Akbar and his Hindu Rajput queen. In this discussion I am interested in the following questions: How is Hindu Jodha's femininity constructed and deployed in making Muslim Akbar safe and acceptable for contemporary India? What can the articulation of the immortal romance in *Jodha Akbar* tell us about myth making and its connection to social history? What narrative strategies allows for the film to embrace Muslim Akbar but not his community? How can we use the film's reception to understand the construction of femininities, masculinities, nationalism, and religious communalism in contemporary South Asia?

**Key words:** *Femininities, masculinities, religious communalism, South Asia, film discourse*

**Résumé :** *Jodha Akbar* est un film qui raconte l'histoire d'amour entre un empereur musulman du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle, Akbar, et sa reine hindoue, Rajput. Dans cette communication, je m'intéresse aux questions suivantes : comment est ce que la féminité de l'hindoue Jodha a été fondée et montrée pour rendre le musulman Akbar acceptable pour l'Inde actuelle? Qu'est-ce que cette romance immortelle de *Jodha Akbar* nous communique sur les mythes et leurs rapports à l'histoire sociale? Quelles stratégies narratives permettent au film d'élire Akbar le musulman mais pas sa communauté? Comment pouvons-nous nous servir de l'accueil du film afin de comprendre la construction des féminités, de la masculinité, du nationalisme et communautarisme religieux en Asie du Sud contemporaine?

**Mots clés :** *Féminités, masculinités, communautarisme religieux, Asie du Sud, discours filmique*

## Introduction

Social scientists (Chakravarty 1993; Farmer 1996) identify media as a site of intense contestation for power and authority. Cinema, in particular, allows for a narration of the nation as it constructs a foundation for the past on which a vision of the nation's future can be enacted (Chapman 2005; Burgoyne 2008). As India takes its place on the global stage as an economic and political power, it becomes important to construct a history through which the nation defines and projects its' image. Historical film is particularly suited for the task for recovering a past in light of the needs of the present. As the dominant media institution in South Asia, Bombay cinema's cultural production of narratives, images and spectacle plays a crucial role in the effort to consolidate and project definitions of the nation. Moreover such images are exported to the South Asian diaspora world wide as part of the processes associated with the globalized cultural product referred to as Bollywood.

In this discussion I examine the production and reception of the 2008 film *Jodhaa Akbar* both as process and product of complex historical, cultural and political nation-building projects and I examine the masculinities and femininities associated with it. But first a few words about Historical cinema.

## Historical Film and Cultural Contestation

*Contemporary theory sees nations as narrated, in the sense that beliefs about the origins and evolution of nations crystallize in the forms of stories.*

Ella Shohat and Robert Stam 2003: 9

Frequently, these stories are relayed to us through historical films which, as Robert Burgoyne (2008) points out, reshape the past to express contemporary concerns. At the same time they provide cinematic interpretation of events that trouble us in the present. Historical feature films then have much to say about the period in which they are made. Through a re-enactment of history spectators imagine they are witnessing the past. Moreover historical films help produce the imagined communities that Benedict Anderson (1983) has spoken of where traditions are invented and valorised by nationalist narratives.

These comments are certainly true of Bombay cinema (aka Hindi cinema). Popular Hindi films impersonate the nation through processes of cultural negotiation and contestation which are ultimately political. In a region known for its ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity the dominant regional influence of Bombay cinema helps create a national narrative which draws upon a North Indian middle class Hindu male citizen and marginalizes others. Although celebrating the life of a powerful Muslim ruler, in this discussion, I argue that *Jodhaa Akbar* serves as an important moment in the recovery of a past through which current dominant visions of the nation are consolidated and circulated and sheds light on the terms under which the Muslim minority is offered citizenship in contemporary India?

Directed by Ashutosh Gowariker, *Jodhaa Akbar* was produced by Gowariker in conjunction with Ronnie Screwvala. Released in 2008, the film was among the top money makers of Bombay cinema grossing \$12,380,00. US (BoxOffice India.com 2009) as it won many national and international awards including the 2009 Filmfare Awards for Best Film, Best Actor, Best Lyricist, and Best Music Score. Internationally *Jodhaa Akbar* has won the Audience Award for the Best Foreign Film at the 32<sup>nd</sup> Sao Paulo International Film Festival and the Best Film Grand Prix and Best Actor award for Hrithik Roshan at the Golden Minbar Festival of Muslim Cinema in Kazan, Russia. Its popular and critical success suggest that *Jodhaa Akbar* is as an influential film and an important moment through which the past is recouped and deployed in the project of nation building. I now provide a brief overview of the film's narrative.

### **The Story**

The plot is simple. *Jodhaa Akbar* details the coming to the throne of Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar, the third Mughal emperor of India (1542-1605) a Muslim and his subsequent marriage to a Hindu princess, commonly known as Jodhaa Bai. The protagonists are separated by machinations of Maham Anaga, a woman who had served as a nurse to Akbar and is now an important confident and advisor at his court. Akbar

comes to know of Anaga's nefarious actions whereupon she disappears from the narrative and true love prevails.

### **Citizenship and Nation Building**

While many of the recent films have focused on recovering a Hindu masculine to help define and symbolize India, as in *Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: The Forgotten Hero* (2005), *Agnivarsha* (2002), *Ashoka* (2001), the protagonist in *Jodhaa Akbar* is a Muslim. As such he is part of a community that is increasingly marginalized through mainstream Bombay films (Rai 2003, Mishra 2002). What strategies then render 'safe' a powerful Muslim king when Muslims are frequently represented as a terrorist threat in Hindi films?

Although Muslims were in power for long stretches of time in pre-colonial India, in the current era, the numerical superiority of Hindus, as well as the increase in anti minority politics pro Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) politics in India ensures them a dominant position. Relations between various groups in recent years have been marked by divisiveness known as communalism. Such communalism, social scientists (Ludden 1996; Pandey 1990) argue, is a facet of British orientalism which institutionalized oppositions and separations between various linguistic, ethnic and religious groups through policies and practices including separate electorates and legal codes. These practices, it is commonly believed, influenced communal violence during the partition of British India into the nation states of India and Pakistan in 1947. As the colonial state was implicated in furthering divisions among various communities so too, Ludden (1996) states, the modern Indian state must be held responsible for current forms of communalism. In addition to legacies of the past and their influence on the modern nation, the failure of secularism and the rise of pro-religious groups with their revisionist histories have also contributed to current forms of the divisiveness.

Particularly since 1980s, divisiveness has accompanied state policies that have not served the needs of the common people in India, as in other Third World countries. Instead various ethnic, linguistic and religious groups vie for scarce resources. Madhava Prasad

(1998) identifies the current era as one in which Hindu nationalism appropriates the national project and attempts to establish 'political unity on a communal foundation' (1998: 8/9). He identifies cinemas as an integral part of these struggles and a site of ideological production of the nation and citizenship. Reinterpretation of history has allowed some among the dominant groups to define India as a Hindu nation, one which sets itself up against other ethnic and religious groups, including against the largest minority Muslims.

Nandana Bose (2009) notes that Bombay cinema's role as a major producer and disseminator of ideology, has not been lost on the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a major force behind Hindutva. Bombay based politician Bal Thackeray, the leader of Shiv Sena (an affiliate of BJP), has emerged as an influential figure in the production and distribution of films, their funding, partisan tax exemptions and granting of awards as well as through his mediation of disputes between stars and industry. Affiliation between cinema and groups with Hindutva leanings has accompanied increasing use of Hindu iconography and rituals in films that has helped bind viewers to a particular vision of Indianness (read as Hindu), to the exclusion of other groups (Fazila-Yacoobali 2002; Viswanath 2002).

### ***Jodhaa Akbar as Historical Narrative***

Given that Hindutva influences Bombay film industry, under what terms is the history of India to be recovered in a historical film such as *Jodhaa Akbar*?<sup>1</sup> How does the nation bring up the glories of a past which is peopled with important players from a community that has lost its cultural, economic and political importance? What ideologies are at play in these processes? What narrative strategies allow the audience to identify with Akbar when Muslims are largely demonized and/or marginalized through cinema? How might communalism influence the 'recovery' of past memories that support its divisive claims? To what extent might this symbolic celebration of India's Muslim past and heroic figures, in fact contribute, to what some might claim, India's self-delusional notions of secularism and tolerance.

Writing histories of the modern Indian state, whether textual or through film, is an important part of these strategies through which, as Ruby Lal (2005) notes, the Mughal Empire is frequently depicted as a preamble. I argue that *Jodhaa Akbar* brings the Emperor Akbar out of the preamble into the centre stage of history. At the same time the narrative domesticates him through heterosexual marital life in the process neutralizing the excessive sexuality and violent danger the Muslim masculine normally poses in current Hindi films as I have noted elsewhere (author name deleted for blind review).

Muslim Akbar's relationship with his Rajput Hindu wife promotes a religious dualism in a period where the king was known for his interest in religious pluralism. Indeed Akbar was very curious about different religions and sought instruction in them as well as allowing such instruction for his children. Moreover he permitted Christian priests to proselytize to his sons, and letters by priests of a Jesuit mission at Akbar's court suggest that at one time they had great hopes of the royal family's conversion to Christianity (Correia-Afonso 1981). Akbar's interest in religion however was not limited to Christianity or Hinduism. In 1575, he erected an *Ibadat Khanna* (House of Worship) in his capital of Fatehpur Sikri in order to encourage religious debates among various scholars. Although initially restricted to Muslims, in later years, people of all religious groups were invited to the *Ibadat Khanna* to debate various religious positions along side Muslims. Further he made an attempt to achieve a synthesis of all religions in a new creed which he promoted. Known as *Din-e-Ilahi*, (Divine Faith), Akbar's vision was based on the principle of universal toleration *Sulah e Kul*.

*Jodhaa Akbar* however does not centralize Akbar's tolerance and promotion of all religions. Indeed the plurality of his vision is replaced by a duality which centralizes Hindu/Muslim relations. Indeed, in Akbar's time, Hindu/Muslim tensions were not as central as they are in 2008. All communities, including Muslims, who challenged the Emperor, felt the brutal force of his military might. At the same time men from all communities were able to rise to the highest positions within his civil and military administration. True the film is a narrative about the early years of Akbar's reign when he was initiating the alliances with Rajputs that allowed Mughals to rule large parts of



India for several hundred years, but unless there is a sequel, this version will come to stand for history of that period for many viewers who tend to view historical film as History.

Apart from this, there are other historical irregularities in the film. In addition to the Hindu/Muslim duality, heterosexual marital love is a central focus on the film. M.K. Raghavendra's (2008) comments that Indian popular cinema takes up social reality through the allegory of family romance are certainly true of *Jodhaa Akbar*. The film centralizes Akbar's relationship with his first Rajput wife, a princess of Amer who he married in 1562 and whose name was likely either Hira Kunwari or Manmati, not Jodhaa. The name commonly used to refer to Akbar's queen, Jodhaa, can be traced to an 1829 book by a Col. James Tod entitled the *Annals and Antiquity of Rajasthan*. Furthermore, the two appear to be in a monogamous marriage- largely reminiscent of a nuclear family. Indeed the plot centres around this central family unit and other events appear as back drop. A marriage is arranged and the well-brought up female eventually falls in love with her groom. The lovers are separated through the workings of evil doers and then united through the force of their love. Yet Ruby Lal (2005) reminds us that domestic life within the Mughal harem was not flat or one-dimensional. Moreover Jodhaa was Akbar's third wife—the first two wives, who were Muslim, were written out of the film script. Akbar actually married seven women through nikah marriage (three more than the allowed four allowed to Muslim men) and then reverted to the Shia tradition of muta marriages of which he contracted almost three hundred.

Did the many women that Akbar was married to inhabit the sexualized harem so popular in current accounts of Muslims? Perhaps we can find an answer in the memoirs of Princess Gulbaden, half sister of Akbar's father Humayun and a daughter of Babur the first Mughal king of India (Gulbadan Begum 2002). Speaking of her father's harem, Gulbaden writes that it consisted not only of Babar's four wives but also daughters, mothers, aunts, cousins, ladies in waiting, servants and dancing girls. Moreover the harem included many other women Babar had taken under his protection including the women of his nobles who had been killed or taken prisoner in battle to prevent them from

being seized as loot. Further some of the women in the king's harem were also wives, daughters and other female relatives of the enemies he had conquered. In effect Babur was responsible for the expenses of these women and they lived under his protection in his harem.

Akbar's victorious battles would no doubt have left thousands of women destitute and many found themselves as wards in his harem of about five thousand women. Moreover his marriages were also contracted with women who were the wives and other dependent women of his fallen military commanders and opponents as well as political marriages which allowed him to extend his network of alliances. Such alliances often occurred at the instigation of the woman's family who wanted a matrimonial link with the Emperor. The *Akbarnama* written by the court chronicler and Akbar's Prime Minister Abu Fazal suggests the presence of an imperial masculinity as a strategy of governance. Akbar's many marriages facilitate the network of political alliances and marriages with Hindu women helped structure this kin to the institutions of empire. Marriages of 'their' women to the Emperor and to other Muslims allowed Rajputs to transfer allegiance to the Mughal regime. Such practices point to an early multi-religious multi-ethnic state.

Akbar's harem, as Lal (2005) notes however was a more clearly demarcated female space with more rigid rules for women than it had been under the previous Mughal rulers. Yet it was not a space where women were passive. Records suggest that senior women of Akbar's harem were important players in imperial rule (Lal 2005) and were often called upon to advise, intervene, and at times to preside over state administration. Akbar's aunt Gulbadan organized a hajj for senior women of the dynasty. The Queen Mother, Hamida Banu Begum did not go on the pilgrimage to Mecca, instead she was left in charge of Delhi and in command of twelve thousand soldiers, when her son marched on Kabul to suppress a rebellion.

Madhva Prasad (1998) points to the centrality of kin based relationships in Hindi films, including loyalty, honour, and servitude to family wishes in ways that we are presented with an idealized cinematic family. In *Jodhaa Akbar*, Jodhaa agrees to a marriage with a

Mughal only to help out her clan and her family. In effect she sacrifices herself for her family and her community. Further Jodhaa consents to the marriage only after Akbar promises that she will not be forced to convert to Islam. As historical films present history according to the demands and to respond to concerns with current needs, it is highly unlikely in this day of increasing stereotypes about Muslims in Hindi films, that a major film would be dedicated to the life of a Hindu princess who was Islamicized after marriage and may have converted to Islam. Yet this is what appears to have happened. After her marriage to Akbar, Hira Kunwari was given the title Mariam uz Zamani. Moreover she founded the Begum Shahi mosque in Lahore in 1611 (Schimmel 2004). At the same time she, along with Akbar's other Hindu wives, had her temple in the palace. Further, Mariam was not cremated, as required by Hindu tradition. When she died in 1623, Mariam uz Zamani was buried near Agra, leading some historians to suggest that she may have converted to Islam (Smith 2001). After her marriage, in the remaining 61 years of her life Mariam uz Zamani, it is reported, never visited her family in Amer. She stands out among his three hundred plus wives because it was her son Salim who became the next emperor known to us as Jahangir.

In his fictional novel *Empress of Florence*, Salman Rushdie (2009) resurrects Jodhaa as an imagined queen and she appears like a dream of pluralist India which Akbar had willed. Imagining willing and sustaining Jodhaa appears for Akbar in Rushdie's narrative parallel to imagining, willing, and sustaining pluralist India. Would the dream live after he died? To a large extent pluralist India lived with Akbar and Jodhaa's son, Jahangir, and their grandson Shahjehan. It was the internecine wars in the waning years of Shajehan's reign that caused the breakup of the Rajput alliances with Mughals that Akbar had so laboriously cultivated.

I argue that *Jodhaa Akbar* both disrupts the process of making national claims in the name of Hindutva and enhances it as well. For example, the film disrupts Hindi cinema tradition of inter-communal relationships. Frequently such relationships centre on Muslim women and Hindu men, as in *Fiza* and *Bombay* where the female protagonist acclaims her status as a depoliticized Indian and gives up her communal identity for her

man. In *Mission Kashmir* and *Fanaa*, the Muslim woman's agency is deployed to regulate and neutralize the Muslim man and save the state. It is the Muslim woman who leaves her community for her Indian man (read as Hindu). The film *Mr. and Mrs. Iyer* is one of the few exceptions where we witness an attraction between an upper caste Hindu woman and a Muslim man. They never touch in the film and part company at the end.

Given the unwritten taboo on relationships between upper class upper caste Hindu women and Muslims who are considered unclean by many Hindus, *Jodhaa Akbar's* narrative articulates a new language of desire that allows for inter religious coupling. Although they are married to each other there is little touching between the two. One of the few times he touches her is when he participates in a Hindu ritual by dipping his finger in vermillion and touching her forehead. The second time they touch is when they are fencing and she has discarded her role of wifely modesty, only a distraction by an attendant allows Akbar to win the match. Clearly she is the Emperor's equal, both when she draws him into participating in Hindu *puja* and when she holds her own during the fencing match. There is one more intimate love scene, a scene which has been edited out of the many versions of the film. I have been unable to determine which version was released where. As Akbar comes to love Jodhaa, she is presented to us as *Malika e Hindustan*, Empress of India, one wonders what title if any his other wives have. Jodhaa's supremacy in the film allows middle class Hindu values to have supremacy at Akbar's court, a court known for its multi-religious inclination.

Despite its inaccuracies, the title captions of the film appear to proclaim its historical credentials as they announce the date and location of the events depicted using captions and voiceovers. Moreover we are presented with an 'authentic' Mughal court through use of period clothes, jewels, modes of travel, and forms of military engagement. Deploying spectacular visual style, the film displays cultural confidence as Akbar is picked out for merit and deserving of Jodhaa's love from among Muslims while the rest of the community, twelve percent of India's 1.2 billion people, are largely relegated to the margins<sup>2</sup>.

The popularity of *Jodhaa Akbar* and the iconic status of its stars insure that Akbar's reign is shaped by its representation in the film. Jodhaa is played by former Miss World. Winner of many film awards, Rai was chosen by Time Magazine in 2004 as one of the World's 100 most influential people. Moreover, as daughter-in-law of the Indian superstar Amitabh Bachchan, Rai belongs to the first film family in India. As Akbar makes space in his harem for his Hindu wife, her temple and her rituals, Jodhaa/Ashwariya comes to love Akbar. As Ashwariya loves Akbar so does middle class India come to love him. In making this statement I do not intend to claim that any other actress would have been incapable of increasing Akbar's acceptability to middle class India. Instead I merely want to point to the ways in which Ashwariya Rai's iconic status within the Indian film industry is deployed to make Akbar acceptable to India. Rai is helped in this venture by another icon of Hindi cinema, Hrithik Roshan who plays the role of Akbar. Roshan who also belongs to a veteran cinematic family has also received many awards and nominations. His muscular body serves as eye candy, particular in the scene when he is displaying his swordsmanship and the camera lingers on his naked torso.

Burgoyne (2008) argues that historical film serves as a catalyst for public debate. These comments are certainly valid for *Jodhaa Akbar*. Despite the editing out of the single love scene in many versions of *Jodhaa Akbar* and the careful crafting of the narrative there has been considerable controversy in the papers. Members of the Rajput community pointed out that it distorted their history, and glorified the life of a man who was responsible for many Rajput deaths. Although known for his tolerance, Akbar also had a sadistic trait. During the battle when he captured the fortress city of Chitor in 1567, Akbar did one of his unpredictable acts of cruelty. He ordered the massacre of thousands of Rajputs and the innocent peasants who had taken refuge within the walls of the fort. The exclusion of this controversial detail throws light on the selective process at play in the film's narrative – and might be read, by some, as an example of filmmaker's intention to glorify and resuscitate Muslim masculinity in a way that other films do not. Many call the Chitor massacre a major blemish on a reign known for its tolerance, which included the abolition of tax on Hindus who visited their places of pilgrimage 1563 and the jiziya the tax which non-Muslims paid to the sovereign in 1564.

There was substantial controversy about *Jodhaa Akbar* in Rajasthan and threats of violence resulted in the film not being released in that state and where it was subsequently banned. *Jodhaa Akbar* was also banned in Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Uttarakhand. Later, the Supreme Court of India lifted the ban on screening the film in Uttar Pradesh and some towns of Uttarakhand and Haryana. How might we compare *Jodhaa Akbar*'s controversial reception in 2008 to that of *Mughal e Azam* a 1960s film which recounts the history of the same historical period? Like *Jodhaa Akbar*, *Mughal e Azam* was also a very popular film. Akbar and Jodhaa had supporting roles in *Mughal e Azam* (its central characters being their son Prince Salim and his beloved Anarkali). The on screen presence of Akbar and Jodhaa however did not evoke the kinds of controversy it did in *Jodhaa Akbar*, suggesting that the factors at play in the popular reception of history in the 2008 block buster *Jodhaa Akbar* are quite different from those which influenced readings of *Mughal e Azam* in 1960. Noting that the 1960s was a time of nation building, Raghavendra (2008) suggests that *Mughal e Azam* helped project a pluralist India while, despite its success, the controversy surrounding *Jodhaa Akbar* speaks also to increased ethno-centrism and regional tensions in 2008.

The power of *Jodhaa Akbar* as historical narrative lies in its attention to detail and its use of vivid colours, fabulous jewellery and period costumes. Each scene is presented as tableaux of opulent detail with interplay of rich colour—almost as if the actors had stepped out of miniature paintings of the period. The scene where Maham Anaga's son Adham Khan is thrown on Akbar's orders from the parapet of the royal fort at Agra appears to be an actualization of a miniature from the *Akbarnama* which is now housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum in England. Jodhaa's clothes and jewellery also appear inspired by miniatures of Mughal women. Tapestry and carpets adorn the various buildings and provide a glimpse of the sumptuous splendour of what the palaces and forts must have looked like when the Mughals lived there. The Urdu spoken by the various characters is beautiful to hear but not historically accurate. There was a stronger presence of Persian at Akbar's court and this is totally absent from the film.

Akbar's India is a place to look for an early model of a working multi-ethnic and multi religious state. The power and strong personality of the Emperor broke with tradition and helped bring about a process through which members of all groups achieved power and eminence in his administration. This pluralist history is not recouped in *Jodhaa Akbar*. Here historical accuracy is sacrificed and the legend of Akbar recouped in ways that the various contesting political, racial, cultural and religious trends are blended into a seamless duality between Hindus and Muslims.

Furthermore, in *Jodhaa Akbar* we see a Muslim masculinity threatened by an aggressive Hindu femininity. The power of Muslim Akbar is tamed through the presence of Krishna is his harem as well as in the heart of his beloved Jodhaa. Jodhaa's agency however does not serve her own desire. Instead it focuses on serving her community – only in the space sanctioned by filial duty does she come to love Akbar. As such it is not a transgressive desire between members of opposite religious communities but one which enjoys family blessing and seeks to further the political and economic interests of her community.

In previous films such as *Fiza* and *Fanaa*, it was the Muslim's woman's femininity which was deployed in the service of nationalism, in *Jodhaa Akbar* it is the Hindu woman who delivers Muslim Akbar to the fold. At the same time, Jodhaa's supremacy in the film allows middle class Hindu values to have supremacy in the Akbar's court – the height of Muslim power. Middle class India can claim Akbar as one of their own. In a sense he no longer belongs to the Muslim community, he has risen above them.

## **Conclusion**

*Jodhaa Akbar* as a historical narrative reshapes the past to serve the needs of the present and speaks to the importance of revisiting history to construct new definitions of Indianess. Its production and reception identifies historical, political and cultural contestations in the region while giving rise to femininities and masculinities that challenge and endorse the status quo. Muslim Akbar, as embodied by Bombay cinema superhero Hritik Roshan, enters middle class Indian consciousness. As such accounts of the violence of his victories are minimized and there is little indication of his many wives

in the narrative. Akbar's seemingly monogamous marriage to Jodhaa helps construct a nuptial morality more acceptable to current middle class values.

As such Akbar challenges previous Hindi cinema Muslim characters who suggest both shades of orientalism: violent terrorism, and overabundant sexuality. Jodhaa's domesticity is deployed to facilitate Akbar's acceptance. She marries a man outside her religion to help her family and community. As such she sacrifices herself for others – a very desirable trait for a Bombay cinema heroine. The casting of Bombay cinema princess Ashwaryia Rai in the role of Jodhaa facilitates acceptance of this narrative.

The articulation of the romance in *Jodhaa Akbar* speaks to myth making and its connection to social history. Tensions within the nation are presented in the language of love. The narrative of lovers becomes an allegory of national anxieties. Dominant preoccupations are presented through discourse on familial relations and through love relations. Tensions among various players stand as allegory of actual tensions in the nation. The film's narrative attains closure through an affirmation of heterosexual marital love.

*Jodhaa Akbar* draws on a shared past and imagines a future based on the necessities of the day. The film responds to social history by allegorizing key needs of the day. Muslim identity in the narrative is not framed around present day conditions instead it is valorised through the romanticized splendour and spectacle of past warriors. Embrace of Akbar can allow for a denial of structural issues which Muslims have to face in contemporary India. Cinematic culture then becomes a negotiated form of national consciousness which allows India to embrace its Muslim past - mediated via Jodhaa's domesticity - to become an allegory of the present. In bringing the past into dialogue with the present, the film points to a collective dream of global power and Akbar's narrative becomes a method of articulating that dream as pluralist and inclusive.

In the final analysis *Jodhaa Akbar* becomes a narrative of truth/lies as well as reality/illusion. It is as much about India's present as it is about its past. It identifies the



fractures as well as the hope of the nation and as a cultural artefact the film also functions as an image of desire. As Bombay cinema spreads outward from India through the globalized cultural product known as Bollywood the masculinities and femininities it projects are disseminated to a world-wide diasporic South Asian audience. The effect of these influences is under investigated.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In making my comments about *Jodhaa Akbar* as historical film I am aware that the director Ashutosh Gowariker has noted that the film is seventy percent imagination and thirty percent history. I do want to point to how the narrative, though largely imaginative, nevertheless endorses current nationalistic agendas.

<sup>2</sup> In making this comment, my intention is not to dismiss the many Indian Muslims who have risen to political economic power in modern India. Instead I merely point to the current status of the majority who are financially and culturally among the depressed groups in the nation with high poverty and low literacy rates. See *Indian Muslims*, 22 June 2007, [http://www.indianmuslims.info/reports\\_about\\_indian\\_muslims/india\\_s\\_muslim\\_population.html](http://www.indianmuslims.info/reports_about_indian_muslims/india_s_muslim_population.html) (Accessed 9 August 2009).

## References

- Agnivarsha: The Fire and the Rain*, (2002), Director Arjun Sajnani, India.
- Anderson, B. (1983) *Imagined Communities*, New York: Verso Press.
- Bashi, R.K., Gajrani, G., and Singh, H., (2005) *Early Aryans to Swaraj*, New Delhi: Sarup.
- Basu, A. (1996) 'Mass Movement or Elite Conspiracy? The Puzzle of Hindu Nationalism' in D. Ludden editor *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community and the Politics of India* Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 55-80.
- Bose, N. (2009) 'Between the Godfather and the Mafia: Situating Right-Wing Interventions in the Bombay Film Industry (1992-2002)' *Studies in South Asian Film and Media* Volume 1 Number 1, pp 23-43.
- BoxOffice India.com, <http://www.boxofficeindia.com/showProd.php?itemCat=215&catName=MjAwOA==> (Accessed 7 August 2009).
- Burgoyne, R. (2008) *The Hollywood Historical Film* Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA.
- Cartmell, D., Hunter, I.Q., "Introduction: Retrovisions: Historical Makeovers in Film and Literature", *Retrovisions: Reinventing the Past in Film and Fiction*, London: Pluto Press, 2001: 1-7
- Chakravarty, Sumita, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema: 1947-1987*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993.
- Chapman, J. (2005) *National Identity and the British Historical Film* London: I. B. Tauris.

- 
- Correia-Afonso, J. (1981) *Letters from the Mughal Court* St. Louis, Missouri: The Institute of Jesuit Sources.
- Farmer, V. (1996) 'Mass Media: Images, Mobilization, and Communalism' in D. Ludden editor *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community and the Politics of India* Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp 98-115.
- Fazila-Yacoobali, V. (2002), 'Yeh Mulk hamara ghar: National order of things', and Muslim Identity in John Mathew Mattan's Sarfarosh' *Contemporary South Asia*, Vol.11, No. 2: pp 183-198.
- Gulbadan Begum (2002) *Humayun Nama* (trans. Annette Beveridge), Lahore: Sang e Meel Publications.
- Hasan, Z. (1996) 'Communal Mobilization and Changing Majority in Uttar Pradesh' in D. Ludden editor *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community and the Politics of India* Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp 81-97.
- Lal, R. (2005) *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Landy, M. (2001) 'Introduction', in M. Landy editor *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media* Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, pp 1-24.
- Ludden, D. (1996) 'Introduction' in D. Ludden editor *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community and the Politics of India* Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp 1-23.
- Mamdani, M. (2004) *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* New York: Pantheon Books.
- Mishra, V. (2002) *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* New York: Routledge.
- Mulvey, L. (1975) 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' *Screen* Vol.16, No.3: pp 6-18.
- Pandey, G. (1990) 'The Colonial Construction of 'Communalism': British Writings on Benares in the Nineteenth Century' editor V. Das, *Mirrors of Violence: Communities Riots and Survivors in South Asia* New Delhi: Oxford University, pp 158-200.
- Prasad, M. (1998) *Ideology of Hindi Cinema: A Historical Construction* Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Raghavendra, M.K., (2008) *Seduced by the Familiar: Narration and Meaning in Indian Popular Cinema* New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Rai, A. (2003) 'Patriotism and the Muslim Citizen in Hindi Films' *Harvard Asia Quarterly* Vol.7, Issue 3 pp 1-22.
- Rushdie, S. (2009) *The Enchantress of Florence* Toronto: Vantage Canada.
- Schimmel, A. (2004) *The Empire of the Great Mughals* London: Reaktion Books.
- Shohat, E. and R. Stam, (2003) 'Introduction' *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality and Transnational Media* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, pp 1-17.
- Sinha, Ashish, (2008) 'Jodhaa Akbar earns Rs. 38.53 in 4 days'. New Delhi, 22 February. <http://www.hrithikrules.com/filmography/displayArt.php?fname=akbarjodha/firstbo.txt&movname=akbarjodha> (Accessed 6 July 2009).
- Smith, V. (2001) *The Oxford History of India* (Paperback). Oxford University Press.

- 
- Tod, J. (2001) *Annals and Antiquities of Rajast'han or the Central and Western Rajpoot States of India Vol.1, London, Smith, Elder (1829, 1832)*; New Delhi, Munshiram Publishers.
- Vishwanath, G. (2002) 'Saffronizing the Silver Screen: The Right-Winged Nineties Film' editors. J. Jain and S. Rai *Films and Feminism: Essays in Indian Cinema*, Jaipur and New Delhi, Rawat Publications, pp 39-51.

**Cooked, uncooked or just half-baked:  
Secular versus religious arguments in the public domain**

Ian Linden

University of London & Tony Blair Faith Foundation

**Abstract:** This paper will explore some of the core misconceptions about the key concepts central to secularity and their interaction with the realm of religious discourse. In particular it will look at the supposed hiatus between human rights discourse and religious views of justice with a view to identifying to what extent religious values and secular values are the same or are perceived to be different. For example why are Reason, Liberty and Choice assumed to be secular values in the public domain differentiating a secular worldview. Finally, the role of assumptions made by journalists about these issues will be discussed as a feature of a mystifying account of religion in the public domain.

**Key words:** *secularism, religious discourse, modernism, human rights*

**Résumé :** Cette communication permettra d'explorer certaines des idées principales incorrectes vis-à-vis des concepts centraux sur la laïcité et leurs interactions avec le domaine du discours religieux. En particulier, on soulignera la prétendue interruption entre les discours des droits de l'homme et des opinions religieuses en vue d'identifier dans quelle mesure les valeurs religieuses et les valeurs laïques sont les mêmes ou sont perçues comme étant différentes. Comme exemple, on propose la question suivante : pourquoi la « raison », la « liberté » et la « liberté de choisir » sont des valeurs laïques dans le domaine public qui constituent une vision laïque du monde? Enfin, le rôle des hypothèses acceptées par les journalistes sur ces questions est abordé comme une fonction « mystificatrice » de la religion dans le domaine public.

**Mots clés :** *sécularisme, discours religieux, modernité, droits humains*

One of the characteristics of religious and cultural dialogue in the public sphere is that it takes place, consciously or unconsciously, as a “*trialogue*” with what is normally called secularism. Or put in another way secular culture and language implicitly form the background to dialogue between religions. Religions or people of faith readily reach a consensus about the threat of “secularism”, often with a circumscribed cluster of issues in mind: notably sexuality, the beginning and end of life, and research on human tissue. More often than not the new brand of militant secularity, from Richard Dawkins to Christopher Hitchens’, provides them with a rallying point. Disagreement is set aside. A common front forms against a common enemy.

Just as “modernism”, a rag-bag of different ideas with no sharp definition that emerged in the period 1890-1910, turned into the bugbear of Vatican Catholicism, so from 1990-2010 “secularism” has increasingly occupied the space vacated by communism - its earlier political epiphany. The reasons and dynamics, of course, were and are different. Fears about “modernism” were the product of a beleaguered Church that had lost temporal power and confidence. Today’s fears about “secularism” arise from a strident blow-back to resurgent religion - associated in part with the need to come to terms with Islam. Contemporary secular reaction derives principally from the impact of religion *gaining* in confidence and public voice.

This state of affairs has been much aided by journalists’ indifference to any consistent account of what might be meant by “secularity” or “secularism”, coupled with their highlighting of several disparate features of today’s society as “secular”. Does the term merely chronicle “the death of God and the growth of ‘disenchantment’ in the developed world”? Does it describe the sharp decline in attendance at formal worship in what mainstream religious organizations still like to call “mainstream” but frankly, looking at the size of the other streams, no longer qualifies as mainstream? Is it the dominance of scientific explanation and management discourse in the public domain and the evacuation of concepts of the spiritual and transcendent from the way people see and talk about the world? Is it a belief that there is no directionality associated with the human life, no Good at the end of the Rainbow?

Or is it an account of what is widely agreed to be a desirable constitutional and political arrangement designed to avoid, or resolve, inter-religious conflict – with an accompanying

historical account of how this arrangement arose as enlightened princes sought to end wars of religion? Is it, getting later historically, a renewed commitment to Republican ideals and a shadow anti-clericalism - with perhaps a touch of Nietzsche's will to power still lurking in the cultural undergrowth - alongside a hidden delight that Prometheus is Unbound? Or more simply, like the offensive description "non-white" or, less so, "non-Catholic", perhaps it is merely whatever religion is not.

It would help to know precisely what people are talking about when they champion the "secular" especially when they are posturing as its passionate advocates. In much the same way, the successful pursuit of Motherhood and Apple Pie would be greatly enhanced by precision about the cooking and ingredients of the pie crust. Not to mention time-bound performance criteria for eating it. Pies, like secular society, require Nurture. Nature does the job for Motherhood. Or so it is said.

It might profitably be made a rule that prior to any attempt to define religion there should be a clear account had to be given of what is meant by secularity. This would be more than helpful for a mass media that assumes – incorrectly - a consensus on the meaning of secularity, understood as the way right-thinking journalists think, while treating religion as something taking place in a residual hinterland of time-warped ethics and idiosyncrasy. Thus debate about religion in the public domain becomes reduced to a simple binary opposition played out in endless variations, from benign, amused tolerance of odd ideas, expressed in a strange language, to strident demands that their interlocutors be shown a yellow card and banished to a private dug-out.

It does not help to return the compliment, in a fight back from Narnia. So let us make a charitable start by assuming that secularity rests on values and virtues that are worthy of public discussion: the dominance of Reason over superstition, Liberty breaking free from the fetters of inertial traditionalism, and Choice/Autonomy understood as a rejection of a constraining dependence, put positively, the growth of the capabilities and capacities in Amartya Sen's definition of human development. And that these values are best found in scientific endeavour and that they are safeguarded in democratic politics and secular constitutions of different kinds. Let us also assume that the UN Charter and Declaration of Human Rights represents humankind's best shot to date at codifying these values and spelling out what they might mean in terms of citizens' relations to states and states responsibilities to

their citizens. And that these were admirably expanded and spelt out in a global “to do” list in UN protocols and in the Millennium Development Goals.

On anything more than cursory inspection of the world’s monotheistic religions, it is not obvious that these values are antipathetic to the message and practice of religion, at least not the best of religion. The root problem resides in perennially positing the secular in binary oppositions to the religious with secularity always presented as normative. This is a contemporary ideological ploy. The capture of Reason for secularity, a relatively recent conquest, is an obvious example. In the Middle Ages it was axiomatic that there were three paths to knowledge. To quote the 17<sup>th</sup>. Century Muslim philosopher Sadr a-Din Shirazi, known as Mullah Sadr, these were revelation (*al-wahy*), intellect and demonstration (*al-ta aqqul, al-burhan*) and spiritual or mystical knowledge (*al-mukasharfa h, al-mushahadah*)<sup>1</sup>. You could, of course, find plenty of Christian mediaeval writers along the same lines. In Catholicism and Shi’a Islamic tradition the importance and inter-relationship between Faith and Reason has been re-iterated over the centuries until, and including, the most recent papal encyclicals. The pursuit of scientific knowledge as an object of intellectual enquiry, for example, is understood as an injunction of Allah for both Shi’a and Sunni Muslims.

The question of religion’s supposed aversion to Liberty and “Autonomy”, superficially more plausible, is perhaps best dealt with within the single concept which encompasses both: human rights. An historical enquiry into origins of human rights concepts illustrates that there is no binary opposition. Indeed the modern concept of human rights has been derived from a concept of human dignity that is shared by all three of the monotheistic faiths and based on a religious account of creation. It is worth rehearsing in some detail to illustrate how much the historical development of human rights discourse has been overshadowed by the adoption of ideological positions.

### **From Human Dignity to Natural Rights**

The roots of the Christian understanding of human dignity lie in the account of creation found in the first book of Genesis: an account of how human beings, mankind (*adam*), though creatures created by God, are made “in the image and likeness of God”. In the contemporary Middle Eastern ideology of kingship only kings were described in such a fashion. So this amounted to an unprecedented and revolutionary revelation. “Thou hast made him little less

than a god crowning him with glory and honour”, the psalmist marvels (Psalm 8 verse 5), reacting to this vision of humanity.

Now, the creation of the universe manifestly remains a secular intellectual challenge with no plausible answer given to the primal question “why is there something rather than nothing?” On the other hand, the explanation how to understand the *imago dei* still remains challenging for any Christian anthropology. It has stimulated Christian theologians down the centuries and has generated a rich diversity of interpretations. It provides the underpinning for the moral theology of St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae*, a stream of coherent thinking that still informs Catholic thought.

Intelligence, free will and virtuous action, human moral agency, are understood by Thomas as essential qualities that define human beings as God’s creatures, and separate them from the rest of the living world in a position of dominion over other created things. And with this status and “right” of dominion goes the duty of “stewardship” over creation in the model of God’s own loving nurture. “Stewardship” is what happens when an elegant Greek word such as *oikumene* gets translated into the concreteness of Anglo-Saxon - as “sty-ward” (keeper of the pig sty). In management language humankind is accountable to stakeholders and God is the ultimate stakeholder in creation.

In the Syriac tradition, Theodore of Mopsuestia, a bishop and one of the fourth century Antioch Fathers, saw humanity as a ‘vice-regency of God’ – a very Islamic way of talking - but he defined it in the sense of forming the bond, *syndesmos*, and pledge of friendship, *philiar enekhyron*, with the whole of the living world, a position of great responsibility and solidarity with creation, indeed an *oiko*-logical position<sup>2</sup>. Any Green activist would get Theodore’s point - if not use his language. The point is that religious language is not some hermetically sealed discourse cut off from the secular. Keeping the pigsty can be upgraded into a religious duty (at least for Christians). Words can move from one discourse to another and differentiate to include spiritual nuances.

Thomas makes it clear that human beings are not made as images *of* God rather they are made *ad imaginem* (to the image of God). This cannot, of course, be a question of *physical* likeness. So a very poor analogy would be a coin carrying the head of an emperor, and, a much better one, a work of art subtly bearing the impress of the artist. The analogy is



developed in the Christian expression “artisans of a new humanity” used increasingly in Latin America from the 1960s to describe Christians’ co-operation with God’s work of liberating redemption. And in doing this work Christians believe human beings draw on or discover traces of God’s own - utterly different and loving - creativity and redemptive power. Apart from beliefs about the resources available and their sacramental dimensions - quite a big difference - Marxist materialists might sign up to a little of this.

Nonetheless the Christian concept of “the image of God” does not underestimate the degree to which sin flaws human beings as God’s works of art, and thus flaws their work as artisans of a new humanity. It would be difficult to do so after the ghastly secular communist and fascist experiments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Jacques Maritain described the greatest binary opposition at the heart of human beings. Sainthood reveals humanity’s capacity to “touch the hem of God” while not losing the ability to grasp the abyss of evil. It is against this background that the second Vatican Council proclaimed the *imago dei* as always anchored in an historical reality, and was insistent that it cannot be understood outside its full realization in the relationship to divinity found in Jesus Christ. To pursue the analogy, the Redeemer is God’s perfect self-portrait as *the* craftsman and exemplar of a redeemed new humanity<sup>3</sup>.

For Christians the plan of creation can therefore never be divorced from the plan of redemption<sup>4</sup>. Human dignity is bestowed both as the product of having been created *and* redeemed – in both cases as the recipients of a loving gift – and the resulting capacity to seek, encounter and ultimately know God. It has an inherent directionality. So a fully Christian anthropology cannot but evoke gratitude and awe. “The name for that deep amazement at man’s worth and dignity is the Gospel, that is to say: the Good News”, Pope John Paul II wrote<sup>5</sup>.

Aquinas himself still retained a mediaeval and hierarchical understanding of the word “dignity” by applying it as an attribute only of “persons” who were “dignitaries”. This quality referred particularly to their endowment with superior wisdom used in, what today would be called, Governance - of both Church and Society. Mediaeval “dignity” made its recipients “fit for political purpose” and was part of God’s providential dispensation. As such, it had to be “honoured” by all. The word used was “*observantia*”. The term still survives in English today in the honorific title derived from *observantia*, “worshipful”,

applied to positions and offices inherited from the Middle Ages<sup>6</sup>. This correspondingly entailed duties of religious *observantia*, observance, towards God.

### **From Natural to Human Rights**

After Europe's discovery of the New World with its accompanying debate about human equality and "universality", by extension this requirement to honour was extended to *all* human beings and nations. It was their due. Obedience to God, based on humanity's unique God-given nature as a creature, now required that human dignity be observed universally. The discovery of "the Other" in the New World opened up a new chapter in human rights thinking. In the words of Archbishop Renato Martino, addressing the ILO in 2005: "In the age-old history of the Church, the concept of a common humanity, stretching to the extreme limits of the earth, introduced to human civilisation a dynamism raising the dignity of the individual and at the same time expanding this dignity beyond any boundary or border".

The late mediaeval social order embodied objective human rights, rights to which individuals were due. The use of the term "right" as *dominium* had originated in Roman Law and had been absorbed into Church thinking and practice from an early time. But "Mine against Your's" was not the only legal concept of "right" in use. A Christian parishioner who had fulfilled his or her religious obligations had a "right" to receive the Eucharist at Easter and the priest the obligation to give it. But in no sense did the parishioner "own" the Eucharist let alone have any dominion over it.

Two other concepts had filled the space later occupied by this new idea of the universality of human dignity; these were an overlapping pair of concepts: "natural rights" and "justice". The Dominican Friars who in the half century from 1511- 1561 led the denunciation of the savage Spanish conquest of Latin America, Anton Montesino, Francisco de Vitoria and Bartolome de Las Casas, proclaimed the right to liberty and the right to property of the subjugated Native Indian population. Their reasoning derived from their theology. "If we want to be sons of Christ and followers of the truth of the gospel, we should consider that, even though these peoples may be completely barbaric, *they are nonetheless created in God's image*", wrote Las Casas<sup>7</sup>. It followed that such alien peoples had an explicit right to self-determination. Las Casas would argue the unpalatable point against articulate clerical critics that this implied a right to continue in their pagan religion without coercion.

In *Sublimis Deus* issued in 1537 by Pope Paul III, and in his pastoral instruction to the Archbishop of Toledo, Juan de Tavera, the Indians' rights to liberty, property and self-determination were officially acknowledged in Church's official teaching. It was the nascent humanists who were uncomfortable with this position. In the same year the term *jura hominum* appeared in a contemporary text denoting the more subjective sense of "human rights" in which human rights discourse would later be framed<sup>8</sup>.

It might have been expected from the victory of the Dominican Salamanca school – named after the university where Francisco de Vitoria was professor - that the Church's promotion of objective natural rights would evolve seamlessly into the modern concept of subjective, "inalienable" human rights of today. For a variety of reasons this did not happen. Firstly the theological defense of the Indians did not go unchallenged in the Church. Secondly the modern discourse of human rights, or the "rights of Man", emerged philosophically from the - anti-clerical - European Enlightenment project and the violent political upheaval of the French Revolution. The former resulted in the Liberal disestablishment of the Church in most European countries, and the latter, mob violence and killing of bishops, priests and nuns. Denis Diderot notoriously believed that freedom would only come when "the last king was strangled with the entrails of the last priest".

In consequence the Church's attitude to human rights in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was characterized by "hesitations, objections, reservations and, on occasion, even vehement reaction on the Catholic side to any declaration of human rights made from the standpoint of liberalism and laicism"<sup>9</sup>. It was only the Protestant philosopher, John Locke, tellingly from outside Europe and in the USA, who made the transition within the Christian heritage with relative elegance and ease. The Catholic Church now saw human rights discourse as part of the arsenal of its enemies, who were addicted to rampant individualism and "modernism", and who were set on destroying the Church. Though even some of the latter, the so-called "social modernists" were opposed to the individualism of the Liberal State, and wanted to emphasize duties over rights<sup>10</sup>.

So it was that when Catholic Social Teaching started to consider itself self-consciously as an organic body of doctrine developing over time, beginning in 1891 with Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, the Church avoided, and intermittently condemned, Liberal language about "human rights", and spoke either of the rights and duties of specific sections of society,

notably workers, or spoke more generally about “human dignity”. “No-one may with impunity outrage the dignity of man, which God Himself treats with great reverence”, Pope Leo wrote referring to the condition of the European working class. But he immediately insisted that there was “no question here of rights belonging to man, but of duties owed to God”. He was writing about the “right” to Sabbath rest as an obligation to perform religious duties, and was more interested in asserting the inherently social nature of the human person against liberal individualism, showcased for example in the pious fraternities and guilds of the Middle Ages, rather than in endorsing full-blown modern trades unionism and worker militancy<sup>11</sup>.

The Church needed to refine this atavistic “communitarian” emphasis in reaction to totalitarianism, to distinguish it from communism and fascism. Pope Pius XI in a 1937 encyclical, *Divini Redemptoris*, condemning communism, proclaimed a basic list of rights bestowed by God on humankind. His successor, Pius XII in his 1942 and 1944 Christmas broadcasts, called for the restoration of human dignity in the face of fascism, and highlighted the civil rights to participation in public life and government. The purpose of social life was “the development of man’s personal values, as the image of God”. He called on young people to fight “for the dignity of the human person, and for the attainment of its (*sic*) destiny”<sup>12</sup>.

But it was the positive impact of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 on Catholic thinking that completed the transition to subjective rights and finally resulted in a comprehensive official promotion of the importance of human rights in the early 1960s. The difference between Pope John XXIII’s *Mater et Magistra* in 1961 and *Pacem in Terris* in 1963 is not so much a matter of content but of the two encyclicals’ intended audience, the first directed to the Church and the second to “all men of good will”. The latter was symptomatic of the spirit of the second Vatican Council which had begun during the period between the encyclicals in a spirit of *aggiornamento*.

*Pacem in Terris* offered the fullest Catholic perspective on human rights to date and not one that was inherently inaccessible to non-Christians. Human nature, St Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans 2.15, “shows the work of the law written in their hearts”; the human conscience struggles to be in harmony with this set of values, and so with “natural law”. In short, the divine order is stamped on “man’s inmost being” and revealed by the human

conscience. Conscience is not some emotional feeling but an intellectual gift of discernment. Ethical choices cannot be read off from natural law as from a car manual but require knowledge and enquiry. Conscience is given great weight in later official teaching even described as “the most secret core and sanctuary of a man, [where he] is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths”<sup>13</sup>. And these depths are filled with both Faith and Reason. It is above all this evaluation of the profound theological importance of conscience that informs in 1965 the Church’s belated proclamation of religious freedom in *Dignitatis Humanae*.

Each human person, *Pacem in Terris* explains, “has rights and duties which together flow as a direct consequence of his Nature, what is most human in mankind. These rights and duties are universal, inviolable and inalienable”. But if human dignity is considered from the viewpoint of divine revelation, rather than the possession of intelligence and free will, from a supernatural rather than natural perspective, “inevitably our estimate of it is incomparably increased”. In a very Thomist way this is not a matter of either/or. *Pacem in Terris* goes on to elaborate the different categories of human rights including economic rights, tellingly placing rights before a consideration of corresponding duties<sup>14</sup>.

The publication of *Pacem in Terris* was in retrospect a turning point. During the second Vatican Council the Catholic Church finally made its own the contemporary discourse of human rights in the UN Declaration. The Vatican as a member state, though, formally endorsed only some of the rights listed. The motivation for this document remained the same as for earlier pronouncements: the attempt to spell out the simple demands of ensuring human dignity. As the declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae* (Human Dignity) says: these requirements “have come to be known to human reason through centuries of experience”<sup>15</sup>.

The Church’s stance on natural law and human rights is not that they are the unique product of a Catholic discourse – they are manifestly not - but available to all. The Church in the Council’s thinking promotes their realization as the gathered people of God not as an exclusive club with access to a special knowledge, not as a private religion of the elect, but as a “sacrament of all humanity” sharing in the common heritage of humankind. John XXIII’s much noted optimism cannot be dissociated from his estimation of the widespread demands,

claims to human rights and consciousness of human dignity, *outside the Church*, that he saw growing in strength during his last years.

But it equally needs to be stated that the hiatus in Catholic thinking about human rights manifested after the Reformation and the Enlightenment should not be turned from a contingent historical withdrawal from a set of ideas into a permanent binary opposition to them. *Pacem in Terris* in the 1960s was no less a contingent re-adoption of a tradition that had been occluded by the terrors of French Revolution and anti-clerical Liberalism. Something similar may well happen with Islam, still today struggling with human rights discourse but with also a revealed purchase on the concept of human dignity in the Qu'ran.

### **Human Rights and Secularism**

The secular premise that human rights trump a concept such as the Common Good and that states' secondary purpose after the protection of their citizens is to arbitrate between human rights claims from disparate activist groups in civil society is itself problematic. Because it is difficult to see on what grounds such arbitration can be made except as a refined evaluation of the Common Good. Because ethics and politics is as much about choosing between goods in the interest of the Common Good as it is about choosing between good and bad. In a time of intense globalisation and interdependence it is, of course, also about the Global Common Good. As is evident this may not coincide with particular national interests understood in the short term, particularly the few years of elected parliaments.

This is relevant because the premise of both the UN Charter and Declaration, and other legal provisions for upholding human rights, is that they are implemented as claims made on states. They are thus rights primarily accruing to citizens of particular states. Humanitarian "law" is international but in the final reckoning depends on states treating it as law. It is instructive to note how few rich countries have signed the International Convention on Migrants and their Families for example. And when they do sign an international agreement, as in the case of the 1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees and its subsequent global extension in the 1967 protocols, how much energy is exerted in trying to circumvent its humanitarian provisions.

To a great extent in practice, in the "developed world" at least, human rights become coterminous with citizenship rights. The European Convention on Human Rights, for

example, becomes “real” i.e. contains realizable rights, to the extent that is incorporated into the national law of the member states, in other words to the extent that their citizens can, if necessary, claim their rights through recourse to law. It is worth noting that in the United Kingdom the protection of failed asylum seekers has depended on the application of incorporated European Human Rights law; government legislation depriving failed asylum seekers of the wherewithal to live has been declared in breach of the European Convention because it was “cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment”. The prosecution and conviction in Italy of Tunisian fishermen “for aiding and abetting illegal immigration” when they picked up a boatload of illegal African immigrants who could reasonably be expected to be at risk on the high seas would similarly seem to call in question the supra-national ethics of seamen not to say the law of the seas.

The way in which human rights seem to disappear as into the mists outside the nation-state is telling. Migrants and refugees, inasmuch as they have lost all their citizenship rights, are test cases for belief in, and commitment to, subjective human rights as such, as a general, universal and subjective right conferred simply by being a human being. And, as was apparent in the struggle against slavery, and re-appearing today in the debate about the beginning and end of human life, a coherent human rights discourse pre-supposes consensus on what it means to be a human being, and what living beings are deemed human.

As Hannah Arendt rightly pointed out, once human beings lose their citizenship rights as did Jews under the Nazis they *de facto* lose their human rights. For “people who had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships except that they were still human”<sup>16</sup>, their predicament is akin to a Hobbesian “state of nature”. Far from a Christian account of what is “natural” to humanity, this liminal condition beyond citizenship may often result in abandonment to an utterly inhuman fate. The logic of Arendt’s claim is thus a startling paradox. “I am deprived of human rights at the very moment at which I am reduced to a human being ‘in general’, and thus become the ideal bearer of those ‘universal human rights’ which belong to me independently of my profession, sex, citizenship, religion, ethnic identity etc”<sup>17</sup>.

So contemporary human rights discourse is not the exemplar of rationality, contrasted with religious ideas about human rights derived from a religious account of human dignity, that might at first appear. Both have epistemological some holes in them. Subjective human



rights have their own inherent philosophical and practical difficulties and lacunae. The non-citizen with nothing but their “bare life”, reveals the philosophical fragility of a purely humanist grounding of inalienable human rights, as well as the practical difficulties of making human rights essentially a claim on the state. A religious belief and account of human rights is thus no more, nor less, of a contentious assertion, or a call to ethical action, than that based on the *imago dei* and human dignity, merely another way of deriving and grounding a universal conception of human rights.

Moreover, the refugee, the migrant, the destitute African villager in a failed state all raise profound questions about secular accounts of rights in the most immediate and obvious way. What does it mean that they have inalienable human rights, if it is not an affirmation of a religious anthropology, an act of faith in a humanity created by God. And thus faith in God’s loving kindness that humankind is able to build a more human world? In this profoundest of senses the Church does have an insight and vision to share with the international community and the United Nations which, faced with these realities, increasingly confronts them with a mixture of concern and cynicism. Such a Christian anthropology survives the paradox of the “ideal bearer of human rights”, the human being with only his/her “bare life”, as pre-eminently the non-citizen without rights.

This vision of a horizon far greater than the nation-state, with - in the worship and life of the Church - intimations of the universal human family and its dignity as the *imago dei* - is an urgent necessity at a time of rapid globalisation. It should complement and support derivations of human dignity and human rights drawn from secular understandings of development. The Church’s own past failings in respect of human rights should make it impossible for promotion of such a vision and insight to become a new and perverse triumphalism, rather than the beginning of a renewed dialogue with other religions and with the secular world<sup>18</sup>.

### **The Bind of Binary Oppositions**

Is it possible for such an argument in favor of convergence to be made in the public domain and in the mass media? Possible but difficult. Firstly the intellectual boundaries of modern journalism is more often than not to take up the default position of framing questions in an either/or format. Granted that the human brain may be hard-wired for binary oppositions, apple-pie/cooked, motherhood/ uncooked, this creates a pre-disposition for debate to require



an arbitrator thus putting the interviewer in the position of power. The ideal radio broadcast from a journalistic viewpoint thus becomes two extreme positions with the interviewer mediating as the voice of reason and moderation. If the framing of the argument is a rampant secularist versus a religious extremist calling in question the opposition is unlikely to be treated with great acclaim.

The second difficulty is that of language. Much of the above argument has been couched in religious language with only the occasional Brechtian break to highlight its particularity. This is because there is much in Stanley Hauerwas's insistence on Christian discourse in the face of modernity that rings true<sup>19</sup>. It is important sometimes to use the language of a religious tradition to avoid the core of the argument being lost in translation. But it is undeniably an impediment to communication outside the specific community itself.

But this need not be the last word. New fabricated pontoons are appearing between the borders of religious and secular discourses across which people can struggle. Words such as "wellbeing" and "happiness" are carrying a lot of freight of late and traffic is flowing between definitions of human development. The Common Good and Human Dignity are being pushed into place to form a bridge from the religious side. The pursuit of common values and a core narrative about nationality in multicultural societies is resulting in the secular state pushing structures into place from its side. The precondition for border crossings is the dismantling of binary oppositions that obfuscate. Journalists and statesmen, religious or otherwise, please note.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Nasr Seyyed Hossein “Mulla Sadra: His Teachings” in *The History of Islamic Philosophy* eds. Nasr S.N. & Leaman L. London, Routledge 1996 Vol. II, 644

<sup>2</sup> *De Iustitia et Jure* 4.1.107b 47; *Summa Theologiae* 2a 2ae, Q.66, art. See Fergus Kerr *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism*, Oxford Blackwell, 2002, 124; Robert Murray “The Image of God: delegated and responsible authority” in *Priests and People* February 2000, 51. Likewise St. John Chrysostom wrote of the “gentleness and mildness” of God as being the key qualities understood in the *imago*. *Homilies on Genesis* 8:6-8 translated R.C. Hill in *Fathers of the Church* Catholic University of America Press, 1990, 109. Pope Benedict XV spoke of not compromising “the equilibrium of nature, the fruit of order in creation, rather to take care to pass on to future generations a world capable of feeding itself”, see Message to the Director-General of the FAO on World Food Day, 2005. Comparable verses from the Holy Qur’an are : Al-Rahman, 16, Loqman, 20, Al-Ja thiath 13, Baqarah, 22, Ghafer, 64,. Naba, 6, Hud, 61, Nisa, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Roger Ruston *Human Rights and the Image of God* Canterbury SCM Press, 2004, 55; Rowan Williams in *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* Morehouse, USA, 2005 takes up the theme from the position of the artist’s openness to transcendence.

<sup>4</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 31 “one cannot dissociate the plan of creation from the plan of redemption. The latter plan touches the very concrete situations of injustice to be combated and justice to be restored”. Paul VI, 1974.

<sup>5</sup> *Redemptor Hominis* 10. Pope John Paul II 1979.

<sup>6</sup> Rushton *Human Rights*, 113 n.8.

<sup>7</sup> Bartolome de las Casas *In Defence of the Indians* (1552) quoted in Rushton *Human Rights* 146.

<sup>8</sup> In column 4759 of Volmenus’s *Historia diplomatica regum Bataviarum* 1537 quoted by M. Villey *Le Droit et les Droits de l’homme* PUF, Paris 1983, 174.

<sup>9</sup> *The Church and Human Rights* Pontifical Commission “Justitia et Pax”, Vatican City, 1975, 18 and see Benedict XVI *Deus Caritas Est* Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2006, 56 (27).

<sup>10</sup> Rushton *Human Rights* 236-266: Peter Bernardi “Social modernism: the case of the Semaines Sociales” in *Catholicism Contending with Modernity* (ed.) Darrell Jodock Cambridge 2000, 295. According to Henri Lorin, individualism “falsifies the idea of right by detaching it from the idea of duty, its source and *raison d’etre*” (1909)

<sup>11</sup> *Rerum Novarum* 57-58 Pope Leo XIII, 1891; c.f. the treatment of exactly the same topic in *Mater et Magistra* in 1961 248-253.

12. *Pacem in Terris* 9,10, 11-27.

<sup>13</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* CTS 1966, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Gremillion *The Gospel of Peace and Justice* Orbis Books 1975, 10-13.

<sup>15</sup> *Dignitatis Humanae* 1965, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Hannah Arendt *The Origins of Totalitarianism* New York, 1958, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Slavoj Zizek “Against Human Rights” in *New Left Review* July-August 2005,127.

<sup>18</sup> The Jesuits in their southern province of the United States, for example, did not emancipate all their slaves until 1839 - the Church has often failed to be the “counter-culture” that it proclaims as necessary in the face of injustice and gross violations of human dignity.

---

<sup>19</sup> Stanley Hauerwas “Why the ‘Sectarian Temptation’ is a Misrepresentation: A Response to James Gustafson” in *The Hauerwas Reader* eds. Berkman J. & Cartwright M. London, Routledge, 1996 Vol.II, 644.

## **Media policy, co-existence and freedom of speech:**

### **Notes for an address**

Ronald Cohen

Canadian Broadcast Standards Council

**Abstract:** The Canadian Broadcast Standards Council (CBSC) is an independent, non-governmental organization created by the Canadian Association of Broadcasters to administer broadcast codes dealing with issues of ethics, stereotypes and portrayal, journalistic ethics and violence on television, among others. The CBSC has now rendered 445 Panel decisions, which have served to define the parameters of permissible (and excessive) content on all kinds of radio and television programming, including news, public affairs, magazine format television shows, radio and television talk shows, children's television, other dramatic forms, and so on. In many of the foregoing types of programming, complaints pertain to representations and discussions of religious issues and religious groups. My presentation will address the nature of the complaints received with particular relevance to religious communities and discourses.

**Key words:** *Media policy, religion, freedom of speech, Canada, media ethics*

**Résumé :** Le Conseil canadien des normes de la radiotélévision (CCNR) est un organisme indépendant, non gouvernemental, créé par l'Association canadienne des radiodiffuseurs pour administrer les codes de diffusion traitant de questions d'éthique, représentations de stéréotypes, d'éthique journalistique et de violence à la télévision, entre autres sujets. Le CCNR a maintenant pris 445 décisions qui ont servi à définir les paramètres du contenu acceptable sur différents types d'émissions de radio et télévision, y compris les nouvelles, les affaires publiques, les émissions de télévision de format magazine, les émissions de radio et télévision, télévision pour enfants, autres formes dramatiques, entre autres. Les plaintes concernant les représentations et les discussions des questions religieuses et des groupes religieux persistent et touchent toute sorte de programmation. Mon exposé portera sur la nature des plaintes reçues avec une attention particulière sur les communautés religieuses et leurs discours.

**Mots clés :** *politique médiatique, religion, liberté d'expression, Canada, déontologie*

The Canadian Broadcast Standards Council finds itself in an odd position on the subject of freedom of expression in the broadcasting area, odd in that the CBSC represents an undeniable constraint upon, or restriction of, that freedom. More of that issue anon. The explanation of that position, of course, begins with an understanding of what the CBSC is and does, and for whom it fulfills its mandated responsibilities.

### **The CBSC: What It Is and Does**

With the recognition, and strong encouragement, of the CRTC, the CBSC was created in 1990 by Canada's private broadcasters with three specifically-articulated goals in mind, all of these then being limited in their application to Canada's *private* broadcasters. With one exception, the responsibility for the public broadcasters has remained with the CRTC. The three goals of the Council were:

- to inform broadcasters with respect to emerging societal issues and suggest ways to deal with them;
- to administer codes of industry standards referred to it by the CAB; and
- to provide a means of recourse for members of the public regarding the application of these standards.

In order to accomplish these goals, the broadcasters sought to broadly mirror the self-regulatory processes of other professional groups, such as lawyers, doctors, architects and so on.

As the growth of the CBSC evolved, the goals became tightly enmeshed. The first task was to create the codes, the rules by which the public's complaints would be judged. Interestingly, one of these, the *Code of Ethics* of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB) dated from 1943 in its initial incarnation. That general "cover the waterfront" code of course needed updating, and other more focussed codes were needed to complement it, in order to have a full panoply of guidelines covering most, if not all, on-air circumstances that audiences might encounter.

With codes in place, the self-regulatory entity would then be in a position to respond to the public's submitted concerns, the "means of recourse for members of the public regarding the application of these standards." The means of recourse was the establishment of a complaints procedure. I will not trouble you with the detail of the evolution of the complaining process, but do bear in mind that this all began before the existence of the Internet and the widespread use of e-mail. Suffice it to say that today written complaints (yes, they must be in writing) can be submitted, as they originally were, by snail mail or fax, and, as you would expect over the past 10+ years, by e-mail or the CBSC's website form. We received about 200-250 complaints annually for the first seven or eight years. The existence of a responsive program is now fare

better known. Roughly half of the annual 2,000+ complaints come to the CBSC directly; the other half are forwarded to us by the CRTC.

The third of the stated goals, the advising of broadcasters of emerging societal trends, is, in effect, an educational goal. To implement it, the CBSC has relied on its adjudicative process. Our Panels (and more about these in a moment) render decisions that put flesh on the skeletal codes, much in the style of the Roman-Dutch civil law. These decisions are rendered in all of the traditional programming and journalistic areas, but the Panels are periodically called upon to respond in their adjudications to new programming trends or to identify gaps or problems in the codified standards. Thereafter, the codes are from time to time amended to reflect the jurisprudential changes. Thus, for example, the 1986 *RTNDA Code of (Journalistic) Ethics* was updated in 2000, the 1990 *CAB Code of Ethics* was revised in 2002, and the 1990 *Sex-Role Portrayal Code* was entirely replaced by the *Equitable Portrayal Code* in 2008. The CBSC is also engaged in the very slow process of creating and publishing annotated codes, which include the collected jurisprudential passages following the code articles or clauses to which they apply.

### **The Codes**

The CBSC now administers seven codes, most of which are not directly relevant to our focus today, namely, religious issues. Identifying them does, however, say something of the nature of the Council and the responsibilities it fulfils. The Codes we apply are: the CAB Code of Ethics (1990), the Equitable Portrayal Code (2008), the Violence Code (1994), the RTNDA Code of (Journalistic) Ethics (1970), the Journalistic Independence Code (2008), the Pay Television Programming Code (1984), and the Pay Television Violence Code (1994).

All of these Codes are CRTC-imposed Conditions of Licence for the broadcasters to which they apply, with the exception of the two Codes of Ethics. Although the two ethics codes are not of *mandatory* application, the CRTC has made it clear, in its decisions related to non-CBSC broadcasters, such as the CBC and Radio-Canada, that the Commission expects of the public broadcasters the respect of, and adherence to, the non-COL standards to which private broadcasters are bound as a result of their membership in the CBSC.

Suffice it to say for our purposes today that the principal clause of interest to this colloquium is the Human Rights Clause, Clause 2 in both the *CAB Code of Ethics* and the *Equitable Portrayal Code*:

Recognizing that every person has the right to the full enjoyment of certain fundamental rights and freedoms, broadcasters shall ensure that their programming contains no abusive or unduly discriminatory material or comment

which is based on matters of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status or physical or mental disability.

Secondarily, though, Clause 8 of the *CAB Code of Ethics*, which is entitled “Religious Programming”, provides:

[...] Recognizing the purpose of the religious broadcast to be that of promoting the spiritual harmony and understanding of humanity and of administering broadly to the varied religious needs of the community, it shall be the responsibility of each broadcaster to ensure that its religious broadcasts, which reach persons of all creeds and races simultaneously, shall not be used to convey attacks upon another race or religion.

### **The CBSC: How It Decides**

All complaints received by the CBSC are funnelled through its Secretariat to the broadcasters about which the complaints have been made. The licensees are obliged to provide a response or explanation to the complainant, who then advises the CBSC if the reply has been unsatisfactory. If that is the case, the matter is either disposed of by a Summary Decision or a formal Panel Decision. The former resolution will be chosen where no new issues are raised and the jurisprudence makes it clear that an adjudicative Panel would reject the complaint. The latter will be used where the decision would be likely to go against the broadcaster or where new issues are raised which require the direction of a Panel.

Each Panel (there are now seven and an eighth will soon be set up) is made up of equal numbers of public and industry representatives. Overall, there is gender equality, and visible minorities and Aboriginal representatives constitute 30% of the body of Adjudicators. On the public side, the Adjudicators include, or have included, former CRTC Commissioners, former Members of Parliament and Cabinet Ministers, a former provincial Premier, a former Lieutenant-Governor, the Chief Adjudicator of the Residential Schools Adjudication Secretariat, communications professors, the former head of the Vanier Institute of the Family, the head of Centre de Recherches-Action sur les Relations Raciales, the former head of MediaWatch, and many other highly credible and committed Canadians, who are devoted to public service.

The Adjudicators review the correspondence, the actual recordings of the challenged programs, the relevant codified standards, and the pertinent CBSC jurisprudence. Their decisions are taken, drafted, publicly released and posted on the CBSC website. Where the decision relates to a third-language broadcast, whether, as has been the case, in Italian, Vietnamese, Chinese or other language, the press release summarizing the decision is also released in that language. While the

50-50 public-industry Panel breakdown might suggest endless conflict, of the 454 CBSC Panel decisions, only 12 have resulted in dissenting views, and only one of these concluded in a 3-3 irresolvable deadlock. An “appeal” to the CRTC may be launched by a dissatisfied member of the public (but not by a dissatisfied broadcaster); there have been ten such appeals from CBSC decisions. None has been reversed by the Commission.

### **Freedom of Expression and the *Charter***

Fundamentally, the point to be made about the codified standards is that they are, by definition, restrictive. They constrain what may be broadcast. Moreover, even if one accepts the argument that freedom of expression is not and has never been an *absolute* right in Canada — the *Charter* provides that it is subject to “such reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society” — it is unlikely that the CBSC codes and the jurisprudence established under them by the CBSC’s Panels would yield results identical to those that would flow from *Charter* decisions by the courts.

That said, none of you would expect that freedom of expression is not primordially important to the broadcasters that adhere to the CBSC’s self-regulatory process. Of course it is, but the broadcasters are content to adhere to a different set of content rules, as determined by the CBSC. After all, the Council is not subject to the same constraints as, say, the CRTC. Constitutionally, Sec. 32 of the *Charter* provides that *its* application is limited to matters falling under the authority of the legislatures and governments of Canada and the provinces. While, as a private entity, the CBSC is not bound by the *Charter*, it would be churlish for the Council not to respect the fundamental nature of the combination of Sections 1 and 2.

That said, the self-regulatory system is not surprisingly more restrictive than the *Charter*. The purpose of the statute is to *ensure* freedom of expression in the face of, in theory, efforts by the state to repress speech. The purpose of the private broadcasters’ codified standards is to provide a protection for the collectivity against what might be seen as the occasional use of the airwaves to the disadvantage of some parts of the audience. Broadcasters have themselves acknowledged, in the establishment of the process and the creation of the standards, that there are places they ought not to tread in the interests of their listeners and watchers.

This may occur in the area of high-value issues, ranging from the right of identifiable groups to be free from abusive or unduly discriminatory comment, or the right to be able to depend on fair and accurate reporting of the news, to (if I may take the liberty of making such a subjective assessment), lower-value issues, such as violent content, sexual content, and coarse language.

(As a bit of an aside, let us not forget that one of the early justifications for the restrictions on freedom of expression in the broadcast area was the notion that radio frequencies are public



property and limited in number by the limited scope of the radio spectrum. While the digital era has ended that technical limitation, the principle of relative, rather than nearly absolute, freedom of expression has endured.)

The point about all such issues, whether of higher or lower value on the societal scale, is that they represent audience-impact concerns, and Canada's private broadcasters have determined that those values, interests and issues ought to be taken into account. Accordingly, they have established codified standards that reflect their common view of everything from crucial to audience-attentive issues. And, by agreeing on standards, they all accept that there will be limits on speech and that, in crass Hobbesian terms, no one broadcaster will attempt to lower the bar to attract audience to the disadvantage of the other broadcasters that agree to toe the line.

### **CBSC Decisions on Religious Matters**

Because our issue is related to religion and culture, I will not spend any time on the lower-value issues. My point, though, about *all* of the standards is that they reflect the fact that free speech is *one* value among a range of societal values. That it is a primordial value is undeniable, but it is one among others, *primus inter pares* no doubt, but not *solus inter pares*. It is, in some respects, a *competing* value. And the CBSC recognizes the power of the microphone in accessing and influencing the public. It acknowledges that "the freedom to express cannot be as pervasive or influential exercised in a kaffeeklatsch or a street corner as across the public airwaves."

As the Ontario Regional Panel put the point in an early decision of the CBSC, namely, *CKTB-AM re the John Michael Show* (CBSC Decision 92/93-0170, February 15, 1994), there are critically important aspects of free speech, such as the entitlement of an individual to express a differing view on a matter of public concern, especially issues relating to government policy. In *CIQC-AM re Galganov in the Morning* (CBSC Decision 97/98-0473, August 14, 1998), the Quebec Panel held that,

of all of the categories of speech, none can be worthier of protection than that speech which can be described as *political*. After all, the freedom to express political views is at the very root of the need for a guarantee of freedom of expression in the first place. It is *that* speech which has historically been the bridge to democracy. This is not to say that *all* speech which can be described as political will be free from any oversight but rather that such speech will be most carefully protected in the face of that oversight.

There are, as anticipated, limitations to the freedom of expression. The one most relevant to our discussion today occurs when the difference of opinion becomes abusive or unduly discriminatory on the basis of race, religion, or national or ethnic origin.

The potential conflict between freedom *of* expression and freedom *from* abusive religious commentary can arise in several circumstances:

1. Comments may be made about religious practitioners or practices that may be abusive or unduly discriminatory; or
2. Comments may be made by religious practitioners on the basis of *their* religious practices about other issues, not necessarily religious, such as homosexuality or same-sex marriage, that may not be justified on that account;
3. Comments may be made by religious practitioners that will not be evaluated as a part of their religion;

### **Comments about Religions or Religionists**

Religions and religious practitioners are not, by virtue of that quality or characteristic, immune from comment or criticism, on the one hand, or farce, sarcasm or parody, on the other. There is always, however, a threshold or level that must be passed before a comment would be understood as being in breach of the Human Rights Clause of the *Code of Ethics* or the *Equitable Portrayal Code*. It is not, after all, simply *any* admittedly discriminatory comment that would breach the Codes; to do so, any such comment must be *abusive* or *unduly* discriminatory.

Thus, when CKVR-TV included a segment featuring a fictional “Sister Mary Immaculate”, that included a number of jokes about religion, there was no breach found. One of the jokes was the following putative biblical response to the question, “where does the Bible stand on homosexuality”, the answer given was the passage in the Bible, in which God stated, “get thee behind me, Satan.” The Panel found no breach.

In *Comedy Network re Bill Maher Special* (CBSC Decision 97/98-0560, July 28, 1998), the complainant considered the stand-up comic’s remarks irreverent, impious, irreligious, in short, blasphemous. The Panel concluded that blasphemy alone would not be sufficient to constitute a violation of the *CAB Code of Ethics*. The comments, it said, would need to be *hateful*, not merely irreverent, *abusive or unduly discriminatory*, not merely impious or irreligious. The Panel expected that comedians are entitled to question tradition and to make fun of formal and possibly outdated values without finding themselves, for that reason alone, exceeding Canadian broadcast standards.

In *CFNY-FM re Humble & Fred ("Danger Boy on a Cross")* (CBSC Decision 97/98-0644, February 3, 1999), the CBSC found that the entire concept of a mock crucifixion in the days leading up to Easter "was irreverent and possibly even in bad taste" but did not breach the Code. The issue for the Panel was to assess whether the barb had become a poison arrow, and whether, in other words, the humoristic device had stepped over the farcical threshold and into the bitter and nasty territory of abusive or unduly discriminatory comment. It noted that "disrespectful and even apparently harsh words *may* be on the safe side of that threshold despite the sensitivity of the listener of the same religious persuasion or even the listener who is sympathetically inclined." The Panel also observed that, "broadly speaking, gibes and parodies which are directed *ad religionem* are likelier to pass the test than those which are *ad personam* on the basis of religion."

Quebec was long the most Catholic of the provinces and the TQS network created a satirical religious program, which, in the end, only ran for two months and a bit. The show was set in "Heaven", as it might be popularly conceived, namely, atop white fluffy clouds and with the Pearly Gates at its entrance. The counterpoint to this classic setting was quickly evidenced, however, by scenes of a bouncer standing guard at the Pearly Gates, a busy receptionist taking messages for God, and the depiction of God himself as a scrawny-looking administrator with glasses and a moustache. The show followed a talk/variety format in which, among other things, God played host to a weekly special guest, who was brought to Heaven following a humourously staged death which occurred at the beginning of the show. God entertained his guest by bringing back "on stage" famous deceased artists, by giving a tour of Heaven and by showing scenes of life on Earth, as it was, as it is now and as it would be if certain events were to happen, on his "oracle" viewing screen.

The Quebec Panel found that the humour in *Dieu reçoit* was undeniably irreverent, certainly impious and arguably, at times, in bad taste. It was casual and flippant with respect to certain traditional Catholic practices, even as to the undeified appearance and nature of God. It was not, however, in the Panel's view, at any time, bitter, nasty, disdainful or hateful about Catholicism and certainly *never* about individuals on the basis of their religion.

In *CTV re an episode of Open Mike with Mike Bullard* (CBSC Decision 01/02-0783+, January 15, 2003), the National Conventional Television Panel dealt with complaints from a number of viewers who felt that skits depicting Catholic priests and allusions to paedophilia in the priesthood unjustly stereotyped all Catholic priests and constituted abusive or unduly discriminatory comment. Host Mike Bullard suggested that he had succeeded in preventing a group of boys from hanging around outside the studio by hiring Catholic priests to stand around. The skits showed actors dressed as priests handing out candy to a young man, admiring young

men who passed by and playing musical instruments. The Panel commented that issues in the public interest often become the subject of satire:

As a general principle, those news issues that are reported in the written and electronic media already are or soon become matters of public interest. They may be political, civic, social, religious, economic, financial, scientific, or sports or entertainment-related, to name only some of the categories or areas that may be said to be of such a nature. In any such categories, they may also be local, provincial, national or international in scope. Some may, by their nature, be humorous, others serious or tragic. Almost all matters of public interest are subject to becoming fodder for the pen, keyboard or microphone of the social commentator or satirist.

The Panel must ask itself when, if at all, such matters of public interest should be immune from satirical observation.

[...] [W]hether the satirically treated subject is judged to fall on the protected or the unprotected side, the Panel understands that the individuals or groups on the receiving end of the satirical commentary are likely to feel discomfited by the exposure.

With respect to the depiction of Catholic priests in the episode in question, the Panel found no Code breach:

[I]n the view of the Panel, satire is not *per se* unfair. [...] Furthermore, in the case at hand, the National Conventional Television Panel disagrees with the argument of essentially all of the complainants requesting this adjudication to the effect that the reaction would have been different had the comments been directed toward other ethnic or religious groups. [...] This Panel considers the humour in the challenged episode of *Open Mike* as sufficiently gently satirical (and related to a very publicly debated controversy) to be acceptable. No breach of the provision of the human rights clause of the *CAB Code of Ethics* is disclosed.

[...]

The CBSC is, and will be, as protective of majority communities as of minorities. In order for it to render such decisions, though, there must be a Code breach. Merely feeling offended is insufficient grounds to impinge on freedom of expression. Being an identifiable group (envisaged by the human rights clause) which becomes the brunt of abusive or unduly discriminatory comment is sufficient.

It is not, of course, every comment touching on religion that will fall afoul of the Human Rights Clause. In *CHFI-FM re The Don Daynard Show* (CBSC Decision 94/95-0145, March 26, 1996), for example, the hosts told a series of “light bulb” jokes, including one which asked, “How many Jewish mothers does it take to change a light bulb?” A listener did not take this “joke” lightly, complaining that it was anti-Semitic and offensive. The Panel concluded that there had been no violation of the Code, and stated that

the Jewish mothers light bulb joke, while ethnically pointed, was neither demeaning nor abusive. It was told in the context of a series of light bulb jokes aimed at feminists, Marxists, surrealists, accountants, etc. It poked fun but did not bludgeon. It tickled but was not nasty.

The Panel added that it is not reasonable to expect “that the airwaves will be pure, antiseptic and flawless when society is not.” Furthermore, the “Panel’s duty is to put a potentially offensive ethnic joke on its societal scale and determine whether it could reasonably be viewed as having gone too far.”

The Prairie Regional Panel did find such an example in *CJAY-FM re Forbes and Friends (multiple choice “quiz”)* (CBSC Decision 02/03-0638, December 15, 2003), which dealt with a multiple choice “quiz” in which the answer “c” was always the correct choice and always the most provocative answer. On the morning in question, there were three quiz questions. The Prairie Panel considered that the first joke, which related to Muslims and the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, was in breach of the Human Rights clause. The allegedly *correct* answer to the question why do Muslims around the world continue to travel to Mecca on the week-end, implied the involvement of all Muslims in terrorist activities. The Panel concluded:

There are times in the life of a society when it is far too easy to single out an identifiable group as a recipient of harsh discriminatory comment. Society is frequently ready to find a scapegoat for segments of its ills, perhaps as a catharsis for their resolution. It is perhaps when such solutions come most easily that society ought to be most vigilant. Since the shocking events that have come to be known simply as ‘9/11’ and the proliferation of incidents of terrorism both before and after that date, it has been all too easy to target the Muslim communities with comments that are generalizations which are negative, hurtful and utterly unjustified.

That was the case with the challenged program. The humour in this broadcast was singularly unacceptable. The implication that all Muslims (how else could one interpret the words “Muslims around the world”?) might travel to their *holiest* city in order to fund terrorist activities is outrageous. To put it in perspective, the failure to distinguish between the Muslim community and terrorists is no more acceptable or justifiable than a failure to distinguish between (to choose one of many possible examples) white persons and the Ku Klux Klan. The Muslim community bears no more responsibility for persons within its ranks who break the laws than all white persons bear responsibility for the illegal actions of Klan members [...] The broadcast of this part of the “quiz” constitutes a breach of Clause 2 of the *CAB Code of Ethics*.

It goes without saying that not all references to religions and practitioners are made in a humorous context. Based on the CBSC’s experience, more of the challenges to serious religious commentaries have been directed at Islam, particularly since the destruction of the World Trade Center towers in 2001.

A local open-line program generated a complaint about the treatment of Islam. In *CFRA-AM re an episode of the Lowell Green Show (Islam)* (CBSC Decision 07/08-0916, October 22, 2008), the question of the day was “Is there something inherent in the Muslim faith that promotes violence and oppression of women?” The majority of callers answered “yes” to the question, but a few disagreed. The host adamantly expressed his own view that “almost every act of terrorism around the world today [...] is carried out in the name of Islam. [...] Don’t tell me this is the work of a few fanatics.” Despite the fact that the host agreed that not all Muslims are “like that”, he reacted negatively to any caller who answered “no” to his question, including those who were Muslim or had personal knowledge of Islam and attempted to clarify some of his points. In one instance, Green responded to a Muslim caller with the word “Baloney!” and, in another, told the sympathetic, apparently non-Muslim, caller that she had “abandoned common sense” and was being “silly”. The CBSC received a complaint from a listener who was concerned about Green’s depiction of Islam and Muslims. The Ontario Regional Panel found a violation of the Human Rights Clause:

In the view of the Panel, the host has mounted a sweeping, abusive and unduly discriminatory criticism of Islam. It was uninformed and unfair. It conceded none of the diversity that exists in Islam or among its adherents. Attempting to disguise his attack on Islam in the feeble “Some of my good friends are ...” clothing or “It’s not *all* Muslims ...,” he consistently made it entirely clear that his issue, from the opening premise of the show (framed as a question, but clearly of

a rhetorical nature) was: “Can you not conclude that there must be a problem within that faith?”, something he time and again argued during the episode was *not* the work of a few fanatics, but rather a reflection of the religion, problems and attitudes that he attributed to the “great, overwhelming majority of Muslims in the world.” Moreover, he brooked no contradictory observations of persons who were admittedly Muslim, informed about the religion, or of a different viewpoint.

There have also been examples of programs on which the treatment of Muslims has been fair and balanced, where hosts have been careful to draw distinctions between peaceful and terrorist Muslims, where questions raised regarding the beating of unfaithful women, although emanating from a Qur’anic sura, was extended to all religions that favour such actions, and so on.

### **Comments by Religious Practitioners about Non-Conforming Practices**

Problematic comments of this nature have exclusively been made by the evangelical right about homosexuality and same sex marriage. In *CKRD-AM re Focus on the Family* (CBSC Decision 96/97-0155, December 16, 1997), for example, the Prairie Panel found that the *Focus on the Family* broadcast on CKRD-AM had stepped beyond the boundary of acceptable comment:

Religious programming does not, after all, have any inherent entitlement to say *whatever* it wants in the name of religion. [...] While *Focus in the Family* is free to describe the homosexual lifestyle as sinful, [...] the program under consideration here has gone much further. It has treated support for the movement as “flimsy” and has disparaged that support (see, for example, the dismissal of a study authored by a gay activist with the general statement that “like all gay science, it really has very flimsy foundations”). Moreover, it has attributed to the gay movement a malevolent, insidious and conspiratorial purpose, a so-called “agenda” [...].

In *Vision TV re an episode of Power Today* (CBSC Decision 01/02-0617, September 13, 2002), the National Specialty Services Panel dealt with a religious program hosted by evangelist R.W. Schambach. The topic of the day's sermon was "demon possession" and Schambach referred to homosexuals as "devils" and "demon possessed". The Panel elaborated on the CBSC's position with respect to religious programming in the following terms:

[T]he purpose of the religious broadcast "to be that of promoting the spiritual harmony and understanding of humanity." In other words, whatever recognition is provided for religious programming in Canada, there is an underlying expectation that principles of tolerance and harmony will prevail. Moreover, the



Code provides no special dispensations from the need for such programming to respect the right of identifiable groups to be free from abusive or unduly discriminatory comment [...]

The Panel considers that intolerant comment can find no salvation by wrapping itself in religious garb. Broadcasters of religious programming must be as vigilant with respect to the other societal values (such as the human rights of identifiable groups) as broadcasters of all other types of programming.

[...]

It should be noted that the Panel does not consider that the concluding words [of Clause 14, now Clause 8], namely, "another race or religion", should be read as limitative. The point of the provision is a positive one relating to ensuring the presence of religious messages in local communities. The final words, "shall not be used to convey attacks upon another race or religion" are clearly intended to suggest that even such positive messages should not be used to abuse other groups. The examples given of race and religion are only examples; the Panel considers it unlikely, if not inconceivable, that broadcasters would intend that attacks on persons on the basis of their nationality, gender, skin colour or other personal characteristics would be tolerable. The Panel assumes that it is reasonable to interpret that provision in such a way that all of the identifiable groups envisaged in Clause 2 will be understood as being included here.

The Panel concluded that the particular comments about gays and lesbians in this program were abusive and unduly discriminatory:

In the case at hand, many of the host's comments are hostile and vitriolic in comparison. He refers to "homosexual devils", a "demon spirit"; in the context of the episode, he isolates and vilifies homosexuals. Moreover, in his evangelical style, he whips up the sentiments of his studio audience against gays and lesbians. The intolerance and bitterness that drip from his lips are extreme; they constitute abusive and unduly discriminatory comment; they have no place on Canadian airwaves, much less in the generally positive and tolerant broadcast environment of the multi-faith and multicultural Vision TV. In any event, the program was broadcast and Vision TV has, in consequence, breached the provisions of Clauses 2 and 14 of the *CAB Code of Ethics*.



In *OMNI.1 re an episode of the Jimmy Swaggart Telecast* (CBSC Decision 04/05-0097, April 19, 2005), Rev. Swaggart used correspondingly unacceptable language in dealing with the same subject:

[Swaggart] began with the harshest cut of all, by saying “And I’m gonna be blunt and plain; if one [man] ever looks at me like that [i.e. like he wanted to marry me], I’m gonna kill him and tell God he died.” That indicates the extent of the hostility Swaggart reserved for any gay man who would regard him with the positive feelings that one naturally associates with marriage. The negativity was so visceral that Swaggart asserted that, despite his own religiosity, he would feel justified in *killing* the man and in *lying* to his God that the victim had simply *died*.

[...]

The problem of Swaggart’s language is, in a sense, exacerbated by the fact that he, as a religious figure, can be presumed to set an example for his community. It would, therefore, be easy for someone to infer that this might be the proper way for a Christian of this sect (or possibly of any sect) to respond to homosexuality. Repeating such terminology also contributes to the desensitization of the public with respect to gays and lesbians and even provides the audience with regrettable and negative terms with which to deal with this identifiable part of the community. The language cited in the previous paragraph is, in the view of the Panel, sufficiently abusive and unduly discriminatory to constitute a breach of both of the Code provisions [...]

### **Religions Entering the Political Domain**

Religions may also depart from their partly protected comfort zone under the Human Rights Clause umbrella. In the case of *CJXY-FM re The Scott and Lori Show* (CBSC Decision 96/97-0239, February 20, 1998), for example, the Ontario Regional Panel found that a religious organization, namely, the Southern Baptists, was not entitled to be shielded from critical comment by reason of its acknowledged status as a religious organization since it had chosen to intervene in the area of very public political commentary. That case dealt with a complaint regarding a morning show host’s use of the word “Wackos” to describe the Southern Baptists who had voted at their recent convention to boycott Disney for its relationship with the television series *Ellen* on the grounds that the star of the show, both in real life and her on-air persona, was gay. The Panel did not find the broadcaster’s comment to be “anti-Christian”:

The decision in this matter ultimately turns on the Council’s understanding of the use by co-host Lori of the term “Wackos”. It is only if the epithet were directed at

the Southern Baptists by reason of their *religion* that the Council could find that the broadcaster was in breach of the Code. If the epithet were, on the other hand, directed at the admittedly religious group by reason of something other than their religion [...], then the conclusion would likely be different. In the view of the Council, the epithet was not directed at the religious group by reason of anything other than the group's stated boycott of Disney by reason of their association with the television series *Ellen*. That stance by the Baptists was, in the Regional Council's view, an economic action regarding a political issue. There is, of course, no doubt whatsoever regarding the entitlement of the Southern Baptists to hold and to express its views on controversial matters of a political or publicly controversial nature. The point is only that, if they choose to do so, they render themselves fair game on the public playing field of political controversy. They cannot expect that they have the right to *publicly* express controversial political opinions and to be sheltered by reason of the fact that they are a *religious* group from the resulting fallout from the ideological seeds which they have sown.

This position was reiterated by the Ontario Regional Panel in *CJBK-AM re Brian Henderson Commentary ("Southern Baptist Convention")* (CBSC Decision 96/97-0253, February 26, 1998) with respect to a different commentary on the decision of the Southern Baptists to boycott everything Disney. The Panel concluded that "the commentary addresse[d] a socio-political issue (*i.e.* the place of religion in business and politics) and [was] not a comment, abusive or otherwise, about the religious right *qua religious group*." The Panel's decision was unequivocal on the issue of Brian Henderson's entitlement to comment on the Southern Baptists' decision to boycott Disney:

In reaching this conclusion, the Regional Council finds no fault with the Southern Baptists' position on the issue; their political stance is their business and their entitlement to publicize it their right. It is just to say that, in so doing, they place themselves in the public arena, justifiably open, in the purest democratic sense, to the criticism, even if exaggerated, of those who do not share their political/economic perspective.

## **Conclusion**

In Canada the CBSC accepts the idea that freedom of expression, a cherished value, is *one* value, but not the *only* value, and that it, in broadcasting, it should be weighed against other values in society. In other words, I think it fair to conclude that, in Canada, we *respect* freedom of speech but we do not *worship* it, to the exclusion of other societal freedoms, many of which have not been discussed in this paper.

The right to speak freely does not, for example, supercede the right of society to be free from hate speech, which, as you know, is a *criminal* offence.

The right to speak freely does not, in the view of the CBSC, supercede the right of identifiable groups to be free from abusive or unduly discriminatory comment on the basis of, among other things, their religion.

So, while it is clear that freedom of speech is a *precious* right, it does not mean that Canadian audiences should be subject to absolutely *any* form of speech. Because the Canadian system does not permit excessive violence during children's programming, because it does not allow abusive comments on the basis of people's religion, sexual orientation or the colour of their skin, because it does not allow imbalance in the portrayal of men and women does not mean that our free speech is unduly restrained or that the Canadian social fabric is weakened.