

The Mismeasurement of Religion

A sermon by Rev Steven Epperson

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I love to look at the common life—business and politics—from the standpoint of religion, and hence am thought to be hard on the sins of the State and the sins of business, trying all things by the light of the higher law of God. But if religion is good for anything, it is as a rule of conduct for daily life, in the business of the individual and the business of the nation. It is poor policy and bad business that cannot bear to be looked at in the light that lighteneth every man and tried by the divine measure of things. It is a poor clock that will not keep time with the universe.

(Theodore Parker)

The earth *is* the LORD'S, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein. Ps 24:1

“Provided I do not write about the government, or about religion, or politics, or morals, or those in power, or public bodies, or the Opera, or the other state theatres, or about anybody who is active in anything, I can print whatever I want.” – Pierre Beaumarchais

Among the surprises when I immigrated to Canada was reading the preamble to the Constitution Act of 1982, which contains our *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. And I quote: “...**Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law...**” Constitutional preambles state the purpose of a constitution and its universal, normative aspirations. The supremacy of God clause in our Charter asserts that our rights are not derived from the processes of the laws of the state. Instead, fundamental human rights come from other sources that precede and transcend the making of human laws. It is between and among these two fundamental principles—the supremacy of a transcendent/antecedent source of rights and the rule of law—it’s in the dialogue they provoke, the tensions that arise, where Canadians envision and work to achieve their common good, the common wealth, for ourselves and for future generations.

Our governments, both prior to and since the Constitution Act of 1982, have been guided by our history, by common and case law, and the experience of Canadians to recognize, protect and even encourage the work of religious communities. When they haven’t screwed up, Canada

has been enriched by the contribution religions and other charitable organizations have made—contributions in developing social cohesion and social capital—that is, the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape a society's social interactions toward a more just and inclusive nation.

From Prime Ministers to the Canadian Revenue Agency, our governments have recognized that religions, along with the rest of the voluntary sector, are “essential to [the] collective well-being...and common good of Canadians.” According to the CRA’s own public statements, “by working at the grassroots level” religions and other charitable organizations “have acquired a wealth of knowledge about how government policies affect people’s lives. They are well placed to study, assess, and comment on those government policies....Their expertise is a vital source of information for governments to help guide policy decisions. It is therefore essential that they continue to offer their direct knowledge of social issues to public policy debates.” (www.cra-arc.gc.ca/chrts-gvng/chrts/plcy/cps/cps-022-eng.html#communicating)

In the year before I arrived here, the federal government signed an Accord with representatives of Canada’s more than 180,000 religious, charitable and voluntary organizations. In a forward to the Accord, the then Prime Minister affirmed that “Canadians have worked together to build a strong, just, inclusive and caring society.” The Accord singled out the crucial contribution of voluntary sector organizations to Canadian society: noting that they encourage people to participate and work together for a common cause, that they strengthen citizen engagement and the skills of democratic life, give voice to the voiceless, and ensure that multiple perspectives will be heard on a variety of issues.

In a particularly insightful moment, the Accord acknowledged: a) “that there are circumstances where the Government of Canada and voluntary sector organizations may advocate different course of policy or choose to tackle issues of common interest separately....” and b) “the independence of [these] organizations includes the right...to challenge public policies, programs, and legislation and to advocate for change---for advocacy is inherent to debate and change in a democratic society.” (<http://www.vsi-isbc.org/eng/relationship/accord.cfm>)

Now let’s fast forward eleven years. It’s November 2012. Richard Benner, the editor of the *Canadian Mennonite* magazine received a letter in the mail from the CRA that began: “It has

come to our attention that recent issues of...the *Canadian Mennonite* have contained editorials...that appear to promote opposition to a political party, or to candidates for public office. Registered charities that engage in partisan political activities jeopardize their charitable status and can be subject to revocation.” The offending editorials? One of them, written prior to the May 2011 election, suggested that readers vote based on Mennonite beliefs of pacifism, social justice and environmentalism, and offered some critical comments on Public Safety Minister Vic Toews. (<http://www.dennisgruending.ca/2012/11/cra-hassles-canadian-mennonite-magazine/>)

(“*It has come to our attention that....*” Oh, I recognize that ominous turn of phrase penned by bureaucratic gremlins. It’s how a letter began announcing that I was to be tried in a bishop’s court on a charge of apostasy that would lead to my excommunication from the Mormon church. But I digress...let’s go back to 2012, and to our home and native land.)

“*It has come to our attention...*” read the CRA letter the *Canadian Mennonite*. You see, the federal government changed rules to the CRA forms on their annual returns, changes requiring religious organizations (among others) to describe all so-called political activities carried out by them in the previous fiscal year, and the nature of the organizational resources used. (And thus, with Form T3010, Canada’s latest experience with home-grown McCarthyism kicked into gear.)

By August 2014, some 50 charitable organizations were being audited by the CRA for political activities that threatened their charitable status: PEN Canada, Amnesty International, The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, the David Suzuki Foundation, Canada without Poverty, Oxfam International, The Canadian Mennonite Magazine, the Council on Canada-Arab Relations, KAIROS the religious, ecumenical international aid organization, *and the Canadian Unitarian Council*. Audits are serious business, that may cost organizations, many of which operate on extremely modest budgets, \$100,000 or more. The Suzuki Foundation has been audited three times in as many years. We have yet to find out the outcome of the audit on the Canadian Unitarian Council.

There is no question that voluntary and religious organizations are not to engage in explicitly partisan political activity and advocacy. We have long observed and respected this expectation, this requirement. Non-partisan political activities that are connected with the stated

purposes and by-laws of voluntary and religious organizations are permitted, provided that we devote most of our resources to education, the promotion of religion, the alleviation of poverty and other work beneficial to the community.

What really changed several years ago was the tightening up, the scrutiny, and reporting requirements by organizations with regard to political activity acceptable to government, and, crucially, the enforcement of a 10% ruling. That is, our congregation and other charitable organizations are required to limit their so-called “political activity” to 10% of an organization’s resources. That means we must keep track of and report to the CRA how our resources are used and prove that we are in compliance. The kind of political activity the CRA has in mind?: “any activity that explicitly communicates” to the organization’s members and “to the public that a law, policy, or decision of any level of government inside or outside Canada should be retained, opposed or changed.” (for the above: see

<http://cuc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Protecting-a-Faith-Organization%E2%80%99s-Charitable-Status.pdf>)

Now I want to assure you that when we look at the full spectrum of what this congregation does throughout the year, I don’t believe there is any way that we exceed the 10% rule.

However, looking back over the past three years....? I’ve got eyes and brains in my head—these measures were used intentionally to harass, intimidate and restrict the vision and work of a very select set of individuals and groups.

And now I’m going to get really local for a couple of minutes. I think that the very idea, vision and practice of religion are at stake. Let us remind ourselves; we cannot do it often enough: The principal function and purpose of religion is three fold: first, it identifies a core problem that thwarts individuals and groups from realizing the very purpose for their being in this life; second, it claims to provide answers to this core threat; and third, it lays out a path for achieving the goods necessary for the full flourishing of our vision and potential.

All of this can be seen in our Seven Principles: we see the violation of the worth and dignity of persons and threats to the interdependent web of existence in which we move and live and have our being as essential, existential problems. Our answer is to covenant as individuals and as a people to affirm and promote—that is, to act such as a) to secure the worth of every

person and b) to stand in solidarity as responsible stewards of interdependence and healthy relationships to one another, to the environment and to the cosmos root and branch.

The means to achieving our Unitarian “answer” are laid out in five principles that include the practice of justice, compassion, and equity, encouragement to spiritual growth, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, the right of conscience, the practice of democracy and the work toward peace and liberty world-wide in community with others. That principled path requires a freely gathered assembly of the like-minded in the public vessel of our congregations. It’s here, together, strengthened and sustained by common beliefs, tradition, and purpose where we work to achieve our religious vision.

This is an all-encompassing worldview that points to a way of life and being in the world. That’s what makes Unitarianism a religion. It’s a world-view that will, at times, walk us out into the landscape of politics, so-called; it may put us in conflict with particular laws, policies and decisions of government, as well as consensual social, economic or cultural practices.

I’ll cite three examples: The denial of reproductive rights and justice by custom and law violates the autonomy of persons and human dignity and worth. In response, since 1963, Canadian Unitarians have formally called on government and the wider society on nine separate occasions to change laws, policy and services in order to secure reproductive rights and justice.

Second, safe, secure and affordable housing is a human right and essential to the worth and dignity every person. Our nation has been in a full-spectrum housing crisis now for over two decades as result of budget cuts, intentional neglect and ideological allegiances to so-called free market solutions. The results have been abysmal; our housing crisis is only getting worse. In response, Canadian Unitarians unanimously passed a resolution at their Annual Meeting five years ago calling on the federal government to pass legislation to achieve a national affordable housing strategy.

And third, in view of First Nations rights and inspired by our 1st and 7th Principles, this congregation voted three years ago at an Extraordinary General Meeting to oppose the Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline, the expansion of the Kinder Morgan pipeline, and encouraged UCV members to divest or cancel stock in those companies.

Those are three of many, many ways a Unitarian religious worldview leads us beyond private devotion and practice and out into the arena of public, political action. It is a way in which we keep the faith—a prophetic faith—to both our religious Principles and to the normative language of our *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* where the latter asserts that this nation’s founding principles are rooted in “the rule of law” *and* “the Sovereignty of God.”

Now I find the expression of divine sovereignty crucially important here, and not a burden. It does not privilege one particular religious or spiritual perspective over another. Rather, it asserts that transitory, human laws—or the rulings of the CRA—are not supreme in matters of our rights and freedoms—those are prior, inviolate, and inherent with the fact of being human—religious and secular. They cannot be abridged or set aside by the dictate of governments which “in the course of human events” come and go, as we have so recently seen.

Now join with me for a moment in a thought experiment. If we were to apply the accountancy requirements and the political agenda of the CRA to...oh, let’s say the current Pope and the House of Bishops of the Church of England, what would that look like? 10%? Here’s the Open Letter of Anglican Bishops, entitled: “Who Is My Neighbour?” addressed “to the people and parishes of the Church of England for the General Election May 2015.” Fifty two pages on civic, moral and religious responsibilities in view of the environment, human dignity, and the common good. Politics. Politics. Politics. 10%? We’ll keep six pages to be generous, and chuck the remaining forty-six. Don’t those clergy know their place?

And the Pope’s 183 page encyclical letter *Laudato Si?* I’ve read the whole thing—prophetic, critical words on poverty, oppression, corporate greed, the degrading of the environment, the deification of markets, and a call to “care for our common home.” Political critique and advocacy from beginning to end. Again, let’s be generous: we’ll keep twenty pages and toss the remaining 163 to satisfy the CRA’s 10% requirement.

I know it’s a bit hammy and theatrical—but do you see what I mean? This is no joke.

Over hundred and fifty years ago, the Unitarian minister Theodore Parker said: “*I love to look at the common life—business and politics—from the standpoint of religion, and hence am thought to be hard on the sins of the State and the sins of business, [for I try] all things by the light of the higher law of God. If religion is good for anything, it is as a rule of conduct for daily*

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During the past year, we have felt the selective, creepy, mis-measuring intrusion of government in the life of our congregation. We’ve felt it breathing down our necks. Posters and letters have been removed from our bulletin boards. New forms to fill out in detail have been introduced for sponsoring public events, and terms of reference for church committees have been revised to comply with the dictates of the CRA.

I respect and affirm the fiduciary and policy responsibilities of our Board and staff as they exercise due diligence on our behalf. We have By-Laws, a Vision Statement and the Principles of our religious denomination that have and will stand us in good stead as we carry out the *full range* of our religious vision and the *consequences* of that vision.

I don’t know what consequences the recent change in government will have on the CRA and us. I don’t know what will happen to its increasingly narrow interpretation of so-called political activity or to its reign of audits over organizations that speak up for justice and care for the earth. What I fear is the dread hand of a scrupulously compliant self-consciousness, of intentional and unwitting self-censorship. I’ve seen its baleful effects first-hand in a prior religious life; and we’ve seen it at work through the annals of history and the in the imaginative dystopias of fiction. It sucks the oxygen of free thought and expression and feeling right out of the room.

Please, let us stand firm and fast in support of this our prophetic, redemptive faith. Let us express it freely and fearlessly in word and deed. And let us stand in solidarity, solidarity with those dedicated to the common good of this great nation of ours—so that we and they, together, will help achieve a fair country, our “true north, strong and free.”