The battle against everything modern

By Jim Taylor

Okay, I have been persuaded -- I do believe in reincarnation. Iran's far-right Ayatollah Khomeini has returned to life as Republican candidate Rick Santorum.

They don't look alike, of course. But consider their views. Both reject anything resembling modernity. Both want to rewind reality by several centuries, to a time when men ran the world and women merely populated it.

Now, I admit that I do not live in the U.S. Nor do I have a vote there. So perhaps I have no right to comment on U.S. politics.

Instead, then, here's how American columnist Tony Norman described him in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette:* "Mr. Santorum … doesn't believe in evolution, man-made global warming, sex for purposes other than having children, separation of church and state, tax-financed public education, a Constitutional right to privacy, contraception, prenatal testing, or freedom of conscience if it contradicts his church's edicts or his party platform."

Both Khomeini and Santorum base their politics on books written many centuries ago, by people who had no conception of DNA, fossils, mathematics, space travel, computers, voting, immunization, or plastics. The major difference is their choice of Holy Book.

Separation of church and state

Santorum's close finish in the Michigan primary last Tuesday makes me fear for the future of the United States.

Santorum rejects "The idea… that people of faith have no role in the public square…" He told ABC News that John F. Kennedy's promise not to let his Catholicism influence his responsibilities as president "made me want to throw up." He later regretted his wording, but didn't repudiate the principle.

Santorum assumes, of course, that any president's faith will match his own.

Would he endorse Mitt Romney baptizing the whole nation retroactively into his Mormon faith? Or even – horrors!--a Muslim president governing according to Islamic convictions? If not, he's a hypocrite and a bigot.

For some time now, I have found the metaphor of the lowly amoeba helpful in visualizing conflicts within societies.

In Zoology 101, we learned about the amoeba, the most primitive single-celled form of life. It is a shapeless blob. It has no brain, no nerves, no muscles. (And no sex, which should appeal to Republicans.) It feeds and moves by extending part of itself, technically called a pseudopod. If that pseudopod touches something painful, it draws back. If it encounters nothing harmful – or even better, some food it can ingest – it drags the rest of the amoeba along.

And I'm sure the hind end digs in its heels, kicking and screaming that it doesn't want to go that direction.

Rick Santorum represents the hind end of that metaphorical amoeba.

Splitting apart

When a pseudopod pushes too far ahead; the amoeba may split. The part that happens to contain the cell's nucleus, its core, will survive. The part that loses a nucleus dies.

That split may be happening in U.S. politics. I certainly see it in Christian churches.

Marcus Borg, a spokesperson for what's called the "Emerging Church," will speak at First United Church in Kelowna, March 30 and 31. The "Emerging Church" bewilders conservative Christians. Because its main focus seems to be what it does not believe any more.

Critics question whether the "Emerging Church" is a church at all. After all, it has no creeds, no statements of faith, no defining beliefs. It is about as vague and formless as the Occupy movement, which also seems to have no structure, no official leaders, no policy documents…

But critics of the Emerging Church miss the point. Its defining characteristic is not a formal statement of faith, but its newly discovered freedom from past strictures. It is no longer bound – imprisoned, some would say – by creeds and philosophies that no longer make sense, that no longer fit the modern world.

Creeds may come later – indeed, given the tendency of churches to institutionalize themselves, some sort of creedal statements are almost inevitable. But for the moment, the dominant emotion is a celebration of freedom.

Conservative Christians' inability to understand this reality confirms Lawrence Kohlberg's finding, 40 years ago, that few people can comprehend an ethical position more than one step removed from their own.

The Christian amoeba has already divided – even if no one is willing to admit it. Not even Borg.

Governing the ungovernable

In the same way, I suspect that the American political amoeba is no longer capable of remaining unified. If Santorum prevails, roughly half of the U.S. population will reject everything he stands for. If he loses, his half will reject the winner's policies.

Robert Reich, Professor of Public Policy at the University of California in Berkeley, put it bluntly: "A party of birthers, creationists, theocrats, climate-change deniers, nativists, gay-bashers, anti-abortionists, media paranoids, anti-intellectuals, and out-of-touch country clubbers cannot govern America."

But neither is such a party willing to be governed by anyone holding contrary views.

It's hard to imagine such a creature remaining viable.

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YOUR TURN

Arlene Erickson, Michael Dack, and David Keating, Margaret Carr, Tom Watson, Douglas Allen, and Andy Arnold all pointed out (somewhat gleefully) that I had failed to edit my own text carefully enough in last week's column. I wrote "in fat" instead of "in fact." Arlene suggested I might have done it deliberately, to see if readers were paying attention!

Steve Lawson noted, "The timing for the error couldn't have been better. At least your article made me read and re-read my writing here many times before sending it I think the computer keyboard moves much fast than my brain ever could. Don't you love it when someone points out an error in something you've taken so much time to write so carefully?"

Lloyd Lovatt concurred about the importance of reading a text on paper: "I do notice a difference, once I print a draft and carry it around in my pocket for a half day before reviewing it. Charlotte Caron still used hand written sermon manuscripts and notes when she was teaching us preaching at St Andrew's College in Saskatoon (early

1990s). She said that we could use word processors if we liked, but she could not see the day when she would not write out the thing in pencil or pen before typing!"

Lloyd also admitted occasionally losing his printouts, and having to preach with his "notes/manuscript pulled out of the ether with my BlackBerry…in spite of its annoying habit of going to sleep every 30 seconds or so."

But even that was better than his early days "where the problem was that the sermon notes were where I had left them on the pulpit in the first or second church of the morning, and I was in the second or third church!"

Tom Watson's writing journey also took him "from a Waterman fountain pen to ballpoint to manual typewriter to electric typewriter to electronic typewriter, and finally to a computer. Computers have surely been a boon for those of us who have to prepare a sermon every week. I never did have to write them out in longhand, but I certainly did have to type and re-type on a typewriter, and sometimes by the fourth or fifth copy I had the words as I wanted them."

About my typo, Tom noted, "Jazz musicians still debate whether the name of Kid Ory's 1926 tune was really 'Muskat' or 'Muskrat' Ramble."

Jim McKean wrote about some benefits of computers: "As a dyslexic I am pleased that technology has progressed since I was going through public school and university. When I returned to post-secondary education to study theology I was faced with a new lexicon. As a result I needed to gain a grip of a whole new series of words and their meaning. The PC helped…

"Words and sentence structure once terrified me. They don't as much anymore, but I still find it easier to express myself orally without notes. I have been told by my parishioners that the sermons read are not as powerful as those presented without notes. Perhaps it is because I am looking them in the eye and not focusing on a page."

Mary Elford: "I write sermons on the computer. Sometimes I have to write a page or so, discard it as junk, then start the sermon. I didn't know it was junk, but sometimes I look back and think 'I wouldn't want to listen to it', or 'what was my point? If I'm not sure, I move it to the end of the file, so I can look at it again, and maybe use a bit of it, or throw it all out."

David Keating was struck by "perhaps the reverse of your point. You're contemplating how these changes will affect us going forward. What about how, having spent their whole lives within the paradigm of writing with word processors, whole generations do not understand how the written word was perceived even a couple of centuries ago? Where does that put the effort expended to create our original sacred texts? Or works like the Code of Hammurabi, laboriously engraved in stone?"

"I teach at a local community college," Charles Hill wrote. "The trend is to have studens submit writing within online class shells. i have mine keep a jurnal of their reading the prbem is i cant read ur txt writing

Darcy Nybo got a professional benefit from the column: "I am a writer, editor, book publisher and I instruct at Okanagan College. I always knew the final version of a short story, poem or book, had to be printed out and edited from paper -- but I never knew why. I will be teaching that point to my students from now on. Emitted light versus reflective light - brilliant!"

John Hatchard wondered, (correctly) "Have you gone from a PC with XP to a new laptop with Windows 7 and the equivalent Office programs?"

John discussed the benefits of computers as writing tools, then continued, "But when it came to writing my Korean War memoirs there was a different challenge. When I completed the last chapter and added a few appendices, I gave it a rest for a few weeks and did other things like tend a much neglected garden or find one or two books that really grabbed my attention. The writers I chose invariably had exquisite styles and their use of language infinitely superior to mine. Then I return to my writing and start to go through it only to find that my

sensitivity to the use of words and phrases had increased. I began to notice clumsiness in word choice and sentence structure so that a week or two later I found I had almost rewritten the book. It was then that I thanked God for the computer that enabled me to do such revision so easily…"

Isabel Gibson: "As a writer and editor, I sometimes save different versions when I want to play with organization at a document level, or copy paragraphs before messing around at the phrasing level, so I can compare alternate versions. This is awkward, for sure, but nowhere near as awkward as trying to compose or edit by hand. For better, worse, or just different, my writing style and editing interventions now depend on the computer interface. I think it has made me a tighter writer, since editing is so easy to accomplish, but it may just have made me a more self-indulgent one, since writing itself is so much less work. I'm pretty sure it has made me a more aggressive editor, again because the changes are easier to effect than to explain.

Bonnie Mulligan was reminded of reading the biography of Mordecai Richler by Charles Foran: "Mordecai wrote his manuscripts on a typewriter. On a shelf, he would have piles and piles of typed pages for only one novel. He could go back to those pages and reread and reconsider them. If he had written his novels on a computer where it's easy to edit, deleting scenes and conversations he imagined his characters might have had, is it possible that [some key passages] in our Canadian literature could have been lost forever?"

Ted Wilson suggested that "you didn't take you thoughts far enough in today's Sharp Edges column. Text created on a computer is usually read on a computer. Do any of your readers actually print your columns to read them? Do you print our responses before reading them? Probably not. What a person should do is create their deathless prose on their computer in the heat of the moment, then save it. When they have had time to calm down and reconsider, come back and reread it in the cold light of another day. If the original is so precious that it needs to be preserved for immortality, do the revisions on a copy. Sometimes in modifying we lose the original train to thought. Saving the original can be a good tool."

Nancy Kerr congratulated me on choosing the Beethoven example for composing. "Beethoven lived in a Transition time very much like the changes you described for writing. He started out as a child on the harpsichord, which plucked the keys. Then the clavichord which hit the keys, and then the pianoforte, which provided nuances in volume. All of these instruments had been tuned as the harpsichord was, and that meant that music sounded 'bright' in some scales(keys) and 'dark' in others. Beethoven immediately took up the well-tempered clavichord, which shaved a few vibrations off some strings so that all scales sounded alike, and was surprised that it was not widely accepted. That is why he wrote 'the Well-Tempered Clavichord.' It also meant that singers could have music transposed to fit their voice range."

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ABOUT MY BOOKS, ETC.

I still have half a dozen copies of a book my father wrote exploring Christian theology through Christian art.

The problem with art, of course, is that it cannot put an abstract concept on canvas. An artist cannot paint an Incarnation or a Resurrection without putting real humans, in real situations, into the picture. The expression, therefore, has to be grounded in a particular culture and society; the infinite and universal has to be represented in finite terms.

My father – who once took art lessons from members of Canada's Group of Seven – spent much of his life after retiring as principal of the Vancouver School of Theology, seeking out the ways artists through the centuries had attempted to deal with this dilemma. I'm probably biased, but I think that in examining the ways art portrays theological concepts, he explained those concepts better than most theological texts.

The book is *Seeing the Mystery: Exploring Christian Faith through the Eyes of Artists*, by William S. Taylor, 94 pages. There are only about 20 copies left in the world. Most of the illustrations are in full colour.

If you would like a copy, write to me – Jim Taylor, 1300 6th Street, Lake Country, BC, Canada, V4V 2H7.

Unfortunately, I can't send these out on the honour system, as I do with my biblical paraphrases. I will have to charge $30 Canadian to include postage, paid in advance.

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I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

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For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, www.seemslikegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Model T Websites." a simple (and cheap) seven-page website for congregations who want to develop a web presence <http://www.modeltwebsites.com>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.

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