

Sunday March 2, 2014

Political debate turns on theology

By Jim Taylor

A little over a week ago, Liberal members of Quebec's National Assembly pulled the plug on a proposed act that would have permitted doctors to assist in ending lives. They refused to let the act come to a vote.

Then, a few days later, the federal Liberal party's national convention overwhelmingly endorsed a policy favouring physician-assisted suicide.

Obviously, in this controversy, political labels mean very little. The division is not between right and left, capitalist and socialist, sovereigntist and federalist.

Rather, it is about theology. Specifically, about our understandings of sin. More specifically still, about whether human beings are inherently sinful, or inherently good.

Born bad

In this current controversy, one side believes that humans are essentially sinful. They are selfish. They will exploit the weakness of others for their own benefit.

If you allow individuals to end their lives with a doctor's help, the "slippery slope" argument goes, all kinds of people will want to dispose of their elderly and/or inconvenient relatives. Governments might seize the opportunity to get rid of their most expensive health-care obligations. Pharmaceutical companies could make a killing – literally – by marketing end-of-life pills.

I can understand that view. I have seen families where the veneer of love and compassion quickly dissolves when elderly parents become a burden, where the prospect of a sizeable inheritance sets siblings against each other. History offers numerous examples of governments who decided to exterminate selected populations. And drug companies show very few ethical scruples about making a profit.

Innately good

The other side believes that people are essentially good. They have the intelligence to make informed decisions, the wisdom to make responsible choices.

I like to think that I – and my loved ones – would fall into that group. And I would not want to spend my own final days in pain or misery, because outdated laws prevent me from finding an easier way out.

Palliative care can eliminate pain. But I'm not convinced it can overcome the feeling of uselessness. I don't want to be kept alive, just to be kept alive.

Proponents of physician-assisted suicide argue that death is part of life. As we try to reduce suffering in life, we should reduce suffering in death. When life becomes intolerable – through terminal illness, pain, or disability – people should have the right to end their lives.

Every able-bodied person in Canada has that option. Suicide is legal in all provinces and territories. No one gets charged with attempted murder for failing to finish themselves off.

But those who are too old, too feeble, or too incapacitated, cannot end their lives without help. Sue Rodriguez, rendered helpless by ALS, campaigned for the right to have assistance in dying in 1993; the Supreme Court of Canada denied her bid. In 2011, the B.C. Supreme Court granted that right to Gloria Taylor (although she died a year later without needing help).

What it's not

So the current controversy is not about whether people have a right to end their own lives. They already do. Nor is it about the law. Although Canada's Criminal Code mandates up to 14-years imprisonment for assisting another person to commit suicide, Quebec's Bill 52 does an end run around the federal Code by defining end-of-life assistance as medical service, which falls under provincial jurisdiction.

It is not even about the biblical commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." If we took that commandment seriously, we would have to abolish our military forces, trained to kill on command.

Rather, Quebec's Bill 52 demands a fundamental re-consideration of human nature.

Are we inevitably prone to sin, to do wrong to each other? Catholicism would say yes, based on Augustine of Hippo's doctrine of Original Sin, 16 centuries ago. At the other end of the religious spectrum, evangelical Protestants share similar convictions of human sinfulness, although they would cite biblical authority rather than Catholic doctrine.

By contrast, most of those who approve of doctor assisted suicide belong to an amorphous coalition of mainline denominations, agnostics and atheists, secular humanists, and those people who claim "no religion" on census forms.

But "amorphous" doesn't imply a lack of conviction. This group believes -- just as strongly as Catholics and evangelicals believe the opposite -- that humans are inherently good. They can be trusted to make wise decisions. They will not abuse their freedoms.

Bill 52 may never come to a vote if Quebec's government calls a snap election. But the division of beliefs will not go away.

Copyright © 2014 by Jim Taylor. Non-profit use in congregations and study groups encouraged; links from other blogs welcomed; all other rights reserved.

Please encourage your friends to subscribe to these columns too.

To send comments, to subscribe, or to unsubscribe, write jimt@quixotic.ca

YOUR TURN

First, an apology. Lee d'Anjou, who taught me most of what I know about editing, used to chide me: "Fact check, Jim, fact check!" On last week's column, I didn't fact check vigorously enough. And so Andrea Murphy wrote, "It was Bev Oda, not Fran, who had the famous glass of orange juice."

Isabel Gibson also had thoughts about that glass of orange juice: "Having eaten breakfast in hotels (although none in London, England) I thought the furor over a \$16 glass of orange juice was silly. Hotel food is notoriously over-priced, as is London. Having said that, when travelling on business, I look for cheaper alternatives than hotel restaurants.

"As for Andrew Leslie's expense claim, yes, the realtor fees on the sale would account for much of it. Are they a legitimate moving expense? That depends on the organization's policy, and they differ. As perhaps useful context, under our tax code, if these fees aren't covered by the employer, they can be deducted from income earned in the new location if the move exceeds 30 km.

So, for a move of 4 blocks, should Leslie have claimed realtor fees, even if they were covered under the policy? That's a question on which reasonable people might disagree. The entire package of military life expects a lot from families -- many spouses, for example, can't maintain a career with the frequent moves. Do we expect them to just accept that constraint but not to avail themselves of the (partly compensating) benefits?

“But your point that explanations are falling on deaf ears disturbs me most. Can we not have adult conversations about this sort of thing? Explanations and context should not ‘fall on deaf ears.’ If we ignore them when assessing someone else's behaviour, who will listen to us when assessing ours?”

Loretta Krauter questioned my reference to Tim Harper's article in the Toronto Star: “I am sure Tim realizes that the buyer never pays a commission -- only the seller -- but undoubtedly just phrased it wrong. But for people who don't know differently, it does leave the wrong impression.”

Doug Mathias wrote, “My first wife hit the civil service over this issue more than 20 years ago. She couldn't stand the pigs-at-the-trough mentality.”

Art Gans added some personal experience: “You may not agree, but real estate fees are included in moving expenses in the military and RCMP. That is part of the cost of having people move as often as once a year in some cases. Leslie moved 18 times over his 30+ year career. Sometimes he was provided housing, in other situations he had to buy. In my case in a 35 year career in two armies, I moved about 20 times. Mostly I had housing provided because as chaplains, we were required by regulation to live on base and be available 7/24. That was changed partly because of what happened in the real estate market in the eighties and nineties, and because the gov't decided it was cheaper to pay expenses than it was to maintain the old military housing on bases, most of which was built shortly after WWII and no longer met minimum building standards.

“The first time I ever owned a house was when we retired here in the Okanagan. At the time of my retirement the rules were different. I was entitled to a house-hunting trip of one week at gov't expense to locate a permanent place of residence, and then my move was paid for.

“Another factor that changed things was that most career soldiers ended up getting married. Barracks may be ok for single late teens and early twenties, but they aren't suitable for families. As the military became a career choice, soldiers got married, then needed housing for a family, but the army still wanted to be able to move them when and where needed, on short notice, if necessary. Thus moving allowances became normative.

“Leslie may not have made a good decision in this case, but his decision was based on the regulations that had governed his life for many years.”

The sentence that got the most reaction was “I take a somewhat extreme view on entitlement -- no one is entitled to anything.”

Bob Stoddard challenged me: “Your position may depend partly on how you define ‘entitlement’, but I am astonished that you believe we as humans do not have a moral responsibility for the basic welfare of other humans. I believe that to be a part of a humane society means we must assist those who through no fault of their own are unable to obtain food and shelter by themselves.”

And ethics professor Glenn Sinclair wrote, “While I have invited media to my ethics classes, I don't think you'll be on my list anytime soon. Do you get paid for contracts you sign for books or articles you write? When you write something (say for the Okanagan Sunday newspaper) do you submit an invoice? If so, wouldn't you say you're entitled to be paid?

“Many people have in their contracts certain expenses that must be paid. As a result when they file them they are entitled to be reimbursed. While you may feel very holy about your CBC bill, your time there was all on the public purse and I'll bet you expected us to pay your weekly salary even if we thought your contributions to the Canadian well-being were less than stellar. You would no doubt feel ‘entitled’.”

In hindsight, I think Glenn and I were talking past each other. He was talking about legal or contractual entitlement. I was talking about an attitude of entitlement.

And to tie that together with Bob Stoddard's comment, no, I don't think that the homeless and poor are entitled to claim assistance, but I think we have an obligation/responsibility to assist them – entitlement and obligation are not the same thing.

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at jimt@quixotic.ca.

To subscribe or unsubscribe, send me an e-mail message at the address above. Or you can subscribe electronically by sending a blank e-mail (no message) to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca. Similarly, you can un-subscribe at sharpedges-unsubscribe@quixotic.ca.

You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

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

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsraps@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- 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.
