

*Sunday October 14, 2012 or some other time*

## **One-size-fits-all for prison chaplains**

By Jim Taylor

About a century ago, Henry Ford told customers wanting to buy his Model T, “You can have any colour you want so long as it is black.”

This month, federal public safety minister Vic Toews told the inmates of Canada’s prisons, “You can have any religion you want so long as it’s Christianity.”

In both cases, I paraphrase slightly. But in both cases, the intent is clear – my way, or no way.

Toews put an impartial spin on his announcement. The federal government, he said, “is not in the business of picking and choosing which religions will be given preferential status....”

Except that he did give one religion preferential status. His own.

Earlier this month, Toews terminated 49 part-time prison chaplains, of whom 18 are non-Christian. The prison system still has 71 full-time chaplains to provide religious services – rites, rituals, sacraments, counselling, and pastoral care – for the nation’s 35,000 prisoners.

This firing reduces the current \$6.4 million chaplaincy budget by \$1.3 million.

Some news reports claimed that all 71 remaining chaplains are Christian; others that they include one imam; still others that two are non-Christian, of unspecified faiths.

## **Minorities isolated**

But only 57 per cent of Canada’s inmates identify themselves as Christian.

Granted, not all of the remaining 43 per cent will want to see a chaplain. But what happens to the Jew, Muslim, Baha’i, Sikh, Shinto, Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, Parsee, or First Nations prisoner who undergoes a crisis of conscience while incarcerated?

They, apparently, deserve only the services offered by 2,000 volunteer chaplains.

Rabbi Howard Voss-Altman wrote in the Calgary *Herald* about an acquaintance, the only Jew in an Alberta penitentiary: “In Toews’ world, this young man has been sentenced...to solitude and isolation in his own faith. He won’t be visited by a Jewish chaplain, nor will any other religious minority be visited by a chaplain of their own faith.”

Yes, this young Jew will be visited by the Christian chaplain. Yes, that Christian chaplain will offer every kind of support within his or her power. But, as Voss-Altman noted, “Christian theology — especially its teachings about sin and forgiveness — are vastly different from Jewish beliefs, and would ring false to a Jewish inmate.”

Chaplaincy training teaches chaplains not to impose their own beliefs on those they serve. But they cannot entirely eliminate their own beliefs. As moral philosopher George Santayana mused, long ago, “An attempt to speak without speaking any particular language is not more hopeless than the attempt to have a religion that shall be no religion in particular.”

Nor can inmates casually set aside their own expectations. Will a Roman Catholic willingly accept Mass, say, from a Protestant woman, whose very presence repudiates centuries of Catholic teaching?

## **Malleable beliefs?**

John Stackhouse, editor-in-chief of the *Globe and Mail* (not to be confused with John G. Stackhouse Jr., the evangelical academic and writer), asked Toews if “the chaplains’ own religious commitments are such that it poses

no crisis of conscience for them to offer spiritual advice and religious teaching to anyone of any metaphysical and ethical convictions whatsoever, even those whose core values are contradictory in one or more respects to the core values of the chaplain?”

Can an evangelical Christian chaplain committed to Christ as Saviour truly enter the pantheistic space of a Wiccan, the polytheistic space of a Hindu?

All religions carry baggage with them. They have a narrative, a story, a theme.

So I can appreciate Buddhism’s teaching on ridding oneself of desires. I can support Baha’I’s egalitarianism. I can admire Jainism’s respect for every living creature. But I cannot simply abandon the Christian narrative I have lived a lifetime with, to sink myself into a radically different narrative.

I doubt if an inmate, raised in one of those “other religions,” would find it much easier to accept guidance from a chaplain whose understanding of the inmate’s roots is merely pasted on.

## **Freedom doesn’t apply**

Toews’ policy contravenes the Canadian Bill Of Rights, enshrined in the Canadian Constitution. The Bill states, “It is hereby recognized and declared that in Canada there have existed and shall continue to exist without discrimination ...freedom of religion...”

As long as you’re not in prison, that is.

Stackhouse cites the biblical Golden Rule: “Do to others what you would have them to do to you.”

He suggests, “Until the Mennonite Mr. Toews and the...evangelical Mr. Harper are ready themselves to receive spiritual counsel and religious teaching from, say, an imam or rabbi or shaman or guru, perhaps they might reconsider this policy.”

Stackhouse doesn’t soft-pedal his scorn. He calls the new policy “stupid, offensive, retrograde, and truly bizarre.”

I don’t question the integrity or compassion of those full-time prison chaplains. They won’t use their privileged access to pressure inmates to convert to Christianity – that’s not the Canadian way of doing things.

But if one’s religious roots are pink or green, should one be forced to accept nothing but black?

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## **YOUR TURN**

I didn’t get 100% agreement on last week’s column about democratic elections. I’m not too surprised.

For example, Isabel Gibson wrote, “I have Venezuelan expatriate friends who might not see Chavez in the light you do, but I like your defining line for dictator vice democracy: Will they go quietly? We do get all wound up about what we see as power-seeking individuals, and sometimes forget that we have the basics right.

“As Woodrow Wilson said, ‘The thing to do is to supply light, and not heat.’ Thanks for doing so today.”

Art Gans also demurred: “I think your column stepped over at least some facts about the Venezuela elections. For example, the near total control of media by the Chavez government. The fact that Chavez, on several occasions took over the national television networks for three hour speeches and the candidate running against him was denied equal time. If Exxon-Mobil was funding his opponent’s campaign, my guess is that he would have had far more opportunity to be heard, but in Venezuela the television networks are controlled by the government.

“I also noticed that the loser had something like 45% of the votes, not enough to win but certainly more than governments in Canada receive.”

I had said that Hitler failed to win a majority of seats, and that is historically correct. But Olaf Henny felt I had misrepresented that fact: “While your assertion, that he did not have a majority is correct, he did get 37.4% and 33.1% in successive votes in 1932, not all that far behind Harper with 39.6%.

“While Harper had to contend with an opposition of only three other parties, Hitler had to crystallize his support out of more than 50 parties represented in the Reichstag at the time.

“After the NSDAP (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiter Partei or ‘Nazi Party’) won as the largest vote for the second time, President Paul von Hindenburg had no choice but to reluctantly appoint their leader Adolf Hitler as Chancellor of the Weimar Republic. Second in the percentage of votes gathered but far behind was the KPD (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands). – not exactly an ideal alternative.”

Steve Roney wanted to sharpen the definition of dictatorship: “Dictatorship implies one-man rule, without checks and balances; how that one man came to power is not really part of the definition. Though you could argue that a dictatorship subject to popular approval at set intervals is not a pure dictatorship, since that is one decision the one man is not making.”

Sam Strauss concurred: “They say that benign dictators may be a better form of government. Problem with dictators as you stated is their inability to let go.”

Bob Walker, living in Washington State, wrote, “The meaning and practice of a democracy is hugely relevant in the United States now hurrying to its quadrennial presidential election on November 6.

“The Merriam-Webster dictionary provides five definitions for a democracy, with the first one declaring that the people are the government empowered to delegate its administration to elected servants from the U.S. president down to the local and proverbial dog catcher.

“Through the centuries, the people in other nations and in the U.S. have bought into this number one meaning of ‘democracy,’ often at peril to their lives. In modern times that includes Eduardo Mondlane, leading Mozambique away from Portuguese rule, Martin Luther King, Jr. re-establishing the century old Emancipation Proclamation ignored by white racists in the U.S., to name a few heroic persons.

“In the U.S. too many advocates of the Republican Party have shelved the meaning and history of democracy that ‘we the people’ are the government. Herbert Hoover led the U.S. into a tragic Great Depression in supposing that fattening the wealth of the plutocrats would trickle down to the commoners. Ronald Reagan took up the banner by insisting that government is the problem, thereby trashing ‘we the people.’ Currently, Messrs. Romney and Ryan are eager to return to the plutocracy championed by the President Bushes. Of course, I fervently hope that the electorate will awaken to the threat, and vote back into the practice of a democracy for the common good of all of us.”

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## **PSALM PARAPHRASES**

I have started including a psalm paraphrase for the coming Sunday with my Soft Edges column, on Wednesdays. Why not on Sundays, you ask? Well, partly because psalms seem to me to fit better with the general mood of Soft Edges, which is more likely to deal directly with faith-related matters than these Sharp Edges columns. And partly because Soft Edges is about 250 words shorter than Sharp Edges, and so including the paraphrase on Wednesday won’t make the e-mailing quite as long.

That does mean that if you want to receive the paraphrase, and are not on the Soft Edges mailing list, you’ll need to subscribe. No charge, just send me a message, [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or you can subscribe automatically by sending a blank e-mail to [softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca).

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## TECHNICAL STUFF

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If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca).

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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](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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## 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](mailto: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

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- [reynoldsraps@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsraps@shaw.ca)
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com](mailto:isabel@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](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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