

Sunday January 26, 2014

Letting the Bible dictate public policy

By Jim Taylor

Last week, Stephen Harper rode into Jerusalem in a triumphal procession. It differed in some significant ways from another entry to Jerusalem some 20 centuries ago. Harper rode a limousine, not a donkey. People strewed compliments in his path, rather than clothes and palm branches. And though he received prolonged applause in the Knesset, I didn't hear anyone shouting "Hosanna!"

But perhaps the biggest difference was the content of his remarks. Jesus censured the Jewish establishment; Harper praised it.

He even created a new definition of anti-Semitism. The new anti-Semitism, he told the Knesset, is any criticism of the policies of the nation of Israel. That would make Jesus – born a Jew, a direct descendant of King David, executed as King of the Jews -- an anti-Semite.

Political ploy?

Some cynics have suggested that Harper's uncritical support of Israel's policies may have been a political tactic to capture Canada's Jewish votes for his next election campaign in 2015.

If so, the ploy could backfire. Statistics Canada says Jews make up about one per cent of the Canadian population; Arabs and Muslims roughly twice as many. That discrepancy will only increase with immigration.

Furthermore, people recall grievances more than favours. Harper's support of Israel has pretty much ensured that the Arab and Muslim vote in Canada will go against him. It will be remembered, for example, that Harper visited Jewish holy sites. But he did not visit Islam's Dome on the Rock.

He took a huge delegation with him to the Middle East – 37 government representatives. Plus 208 non-government people, including one Roman Catholic priest/journalist and 21 rabbis. But, as far as I can tell, not one imam. And no clergy from any Orthodox, Anglican, United, or Lutheran churches – only from the evangelical churches.

Stephen Harper and his wife Laureen attend East Gate Alliance Church in Ottawa, an evangelical congregation. Its website declares that it accepts the Bible as the authoritative Word of God: "The Old and New Testaments, inerrant as originally given, were verbally inspired by God and are a complete revelation of His will for the salvation of people. They constitute the divine and only rule of Christian faith and practice."

Biblical straitjacket

As an individual, Harper is entitled to believe whatever he wants; as Prime Minister, he isn't. Harper has said that he supports Israel wholeheartedly because it is the only democracy in the Middle East.

I suspect that he's only telling half the truth. He backs Israel because he believes in the Bible. If he accepts the Bible as authoritative, he has no choice.

When the Hebrew slaves were fleeing from Egypt, God told Moses, "I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession."

Actually, God was a little vague about the Promised Land's borders. At first, God simply told Abraham to go "to a land that I will show you"; another time, God promised Abraham everything from the Nile to the Euphrates.

Setting aside those quibbles, though, the Bible repeatedly asserts Israel's right to occupy land already populated by at least ten tribes, collectively called the Canaanites (in Greek, the fabled Phoenicians).

For the same reason, I think, Harper is dismantling or re-directing research by Canada's scientists. Instead of doing pure research, the National Research Council is being turned into a service agency for business. With seven per cent of all the world's fresh water in Canada, the Experimental Lakes Project deserved its worldwide recognition for environmental research; Harper shut it down. Environmental scientists have been muzzled, their studies filtered through a public relations department in Ottawa. Statistics Canada had the validity of its census weakened. Irreplaceable documents have gone into dumpsters as the Harper government closed 25 libraries in 13 federal departments and agencies.

Who needs that information, if everything we really need to know is in the Bible?

But no cuts to armed forces, law enforcement, and punishment – functions endorsed in the biblical narrative.

Media cop-out

Harper is too smart to declare this doctrine publicly. And the media are too scared to ask questions that might invade his freedom of religion. Ever since the Kennedy campaign in 1960, when Americans feared that the Vatican might control the White House, politicians' personal religious beliefs have been out of bounds.

But when they affect political decisions, those beliefs shouldn't be overlooked.

I see Harper as a watered-down (that is, classically Canadian) version of far-right Republicans in the U.S. They make no secret of their desire to eliminate from their education system anything -- biology, zoology, evolution, geology, even astronomy -- that might conflict with the ultimate truths of the Bible.

Canadian media have never grilled Harper about his doctrinal convictions. In the shadows of his Israel pilgrimage, perhaps they should.

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YOUR TURN

Don Schau wrote about last week's column on the often-unnoticed biases in news reports, "When people recognize their biases, they may not be able to eliminate them, but at least they can start to see them for what they are.

"It is interesting that we often think we are being objective even when we are not. For example, you suggested that the Canadian dollar nosedived and presented it as a fact. That the dollar dropped from x to y is a fact; 'nosedived' is an opinion. I would also suggest that 'blasted' might be an opinion unless Neil Young described it that way himself. As I haven't been rolling that story closely, I am unqualified to say.

"I always try, not always successfully, to choose my words with care. Even more in the written than the spoken word, the listener applies a tone that can set the meaning. It is essential to pick words that allow the message to be clearly stated. Unfortunately, particularly in the media, words are picked to evoke a certain opinion rather than to avoid one."

Steve Roney thought I was overstating my case: "To say 'all opinions are biased' seems to imply that there is no value in trying to avoid bias. In other words, it is a justification for lying.

"While it is true in principle that no opinion is perfectly unbiased, just as no steel, say, is perfectly pure, that is a truth of no practical value, and much possible mischief. Being aware of this is trivial; what matters is knowing to choose the purest steel available to build your bridge. Just so, it is important to express as unbiased an opinion as possible as a writer, and to detect bias as a reader."

Isabel Gibson commented, “Hard to see another's bias. Tougher, I think, to see one's own. Even tougher to do much about it. Reading and listening widely is likely the best defence but, again, so easy just to hang out with those who think as we do.”

Isabel wondered what the “one word” was that could affect a realtor’s valuation of a property. (She would like to be able to use such a persuasive word!) My paraphrase of Daniel Kahneman’s text was misleading. It’s not that there is any one word that has so much effect – his point was only that a judiciously chosen word of description could influence realtors, compared to the same listing without that word.

Kitty Roark recalled, “My dad had a saying: ‘When it comes to truth, there is my truth, your truth, and the actual truth.’ It came back to me when I read your article.”

Elizabeth Collicott and Bill Peterson both sent letters continuing the discussion about supporting (or not supporting) charities. I think it’s time to let that subject drop.

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.

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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

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" -- reynoldsrap@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.
