

Sunday May 27, 2012

Not the tuition, but the system

By Jim Taylor

The “Arab Spring” has reached Canada.

Last year, around this time, huge crowds massed in Tahrir Square in Cairo, demanding a change in their government. On the surface, at least, they succeeded. Hosni Mubarak resigned – fled, more accurately – and this week Egypt had its first democratic election in decades.

Before the Egyptian revolution came the Tunisian revolution, which evicted and exiled President Zine ben Ali. Unfortunately, because the mass media have very short attention spans, we haven’t heard as much about how the Tunisian experience has worked out.

The revolution in Libya did not unfold as smoothly as in Egypt and Tunisia. Moammar Qaddafi fought to the end. Enraptured by idealism, NATO hurled its air power behind the rebel forces. Who eventually found Qaddafi hiding in a culvert and shot him.

So much for an orderly transition to democracy.

And in Syria, Bashar Al-Assad has not been infected by western beliefs about the sanctity of human life. He still sees himself as a kind of Roman emperor. It’s his land. His people. He can do whatever he wants with them, just as if they were slaves.

Missing the point

Now Quebec is getting the Arab Spring treatment. Montreal recently marked the 100th consecutive day of marches and demonstrations, and sometimes of riots. News programs show streets plugged with protesters. Traffic reports warn residents against taking their cars into the downtown area.

Of course, there are significant differences. Police have not massacred civilians. No foreign powers have meddled. Effigies of Premier Jean Charest have not been burned.

Most reports treat the Quebec confrontations as being only about tuition increases. I think they miss the point. Like Arab Spring last year, these demonstrations are not just against a policy or a person. They’re against a system.

To my mind, it is no coincidence that these demonstrations take place at the same time as a judicial inquiry opens into corruption in Quebec’s construction industry. Organized crime, it would seem, controls the construction companies, the labour unions, and the politicians who sign the contracts.

Public confidence has hit bottom.

A broken system

Premier Charest’s government doesn’t get it. He re-organizes the deck chairs in a sinking cabinet. He bargains over the amount of tuition increases – as if one or two outspoken leaders could command compliance from a hundred thousand disgruntled students.

But suppose Charest capitulated. Suppose he cancelled tuition increases completely.

Quebec tuition is already just half as high as the rest of the country. Quebec would have to increase taxes. Would taxpayers meekly accept the increase? Or would they take their turn filling the streets in protest?

What’s broken here is the whole process by which decisions get made. By a select few. Who have all served apprenticeships within a system that rewards mindless loyalty.

To paraphrase a simplistic saying about another issue, “It’s the system, stupid!”

Biblical parallels

When theologian Marcus Borg presented three lectures recently in Kelowna, he referred repeatedly to the “domination system” of biblical times. Jesus, Borg argued, was crucified because his words and actions mocked that domination system.

I heard Borg focus mainly on the “domination” element of that expression. After all, he belongs to a superpower that dominates the modern world the way Rome dominated the biblical world. The U.S. spends as much on military might as all the rest of the world put together. When its dollar sneezes, every other currency gets pneumonia.

But I think Jesus was not so much opposing any particular dominant power – be it Rome or Jerusalem – as scorning the system by which people attain power.

How do you rise to power? By working your way up through the ranks. You sit on committees. You assume greater responsibilities. You ride your cronies’ coattails. You organize networks of like-minded people.

And in the process, you sell your soul.

Jesus did none of those. The gospels – assuming they contain valid historical data – make clear that he refused to get promoted to a figurehead position. He didn’t gather mobs of obedient followers. He didn’t choose friends strategically. He refused to get bought off by the possibilities of power.

A former moderator of the United Church of Canada, Walter Farquharson, once muttered a modern variant on Descartes’ famous equation: “I can be bought. Therefore I am.”

Serving apprenticeships

I’ve seen this system in corporations. In politics. In churches. In community organizations and service clubs....

No one vaults to the top simply by having talent or wisdom. First you earn your spurs in a presbytery or diocese, a group committee, a political party, a management hierarchy...

That system ensures that the people who take over from the Mubaraks, the ben Alis – and the Charests -- have already been indoctrinated.

If Charest falls – no, when Charest falls – will the protest movement in Quebec instantly invent a new government with a different ethos? Will organized crime quietly creep away to Prince Edward Island?

Not likely.

Some leaders will tumble. Some already have. But their replacements will still be part of the system.

It’s the system itself that’s under attack.

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YOUR TURN

The end-of-life issues I tackled in last week’s column always seem to generate thoughtful response. Perhaps we’re all growing older. Come to think of it, of course we’re all growing older – perhaps we’re becoming more aware of growing older!

LeeAnn Blackert described her own recent experience: “One month ago I left Kamloops on a sunny Sunday afternoon for two weeks of study leave and time off. One of my last stops was to visit a parishioner under hospice care. She was clearly at the end of her life, and her pain was excruciating. The hospice staff, in spite of their best efforts, could find no medication to touch it. For five horrendous days this beautiful woman lived with pain beyond what any human being should.

“Four days later, my partner called to report she was on the way to the vet clinic with my 14-year-old cat. She had found Nika in the middle of the living room floor in great distress and with no apparent movement in her back legs. When they arrived at the clinic, the crew heard Nika's breathing and noises, grabbed the kennel, rushed her into a room, put her on oxygen, gave her a quick exam, and announced that she had thrown a blood clot and was essentially paralyzed and in excruciating pain.

“Within 15 minutes of her arrival at the clinic, my cat was freed from her pain and gently ushered out of her life in this world. She was not made to lie in a bed with her body distorted and agony written all over her face. We did not have to stand by watching and waiting, helpless to do anything.

“That week brought home to me the need for some alternative to palliative care that provides no relief to a clearly dying soul. All this transpired while I was house and dog-sitting for friends in Washington State, which has a new Death With Dignity Act, allowing persons with a terminal illness to choose to end their lives in a ‘humane and compassionate way’ with medicine. It was also brought to my attention that heroin apparently provides pain relief in such situations, but, like marijuana for so long, heroin remains illegal, even for medicinal use.”

Jim Henderschedt (who sends out his own musings occasionally) wrote, “This is an issue that must be addressed. Your article today acknowledges the 900-pound gorilla in the room. My hat is off to Canada for its willingness to at least bring the issues out into the open. Hopefully this will be a start for an adult global wrestling with the issues.”

Old friend Ray Shaver picked up on my final lines: “Although you state that you are not in favour of euthanasia it sounds to me that if the subject was thoroughly debated resulting in its acceptance under tightly controlled circumstances, you might be in favour. I certainly am in favour and hope it is legal if I, or any of my loved ones, ever get to a state similar to that experienced by Sue Rodriguez near the end of her life. Why do we treat the end of life of our dogs and cats differently than our own?”

Isobel Gibson recommended “Atul Gawande's New Yorker essay: ‘Letting Go’. I read it in the 2011 version of ‘The Best American Science and Nature Writing’; it also appears to be available in full version on the New Yorker's site. As a general surgeon, Gawande writes compellingly on end-of-life issues palliative care, and on taking the opportunity to have The Talk before being in crisis.”

I'll give the closing comment to Marjorie Gibson, Isobel's mother: “At ninety one lives with the reality that death is bound to be close, and it sharpens one's reactions. My favorite part [of the article] is the following: ‘I am not in favour of suicide or euthanasia. And I sincerely hope I never reach the state where I long for either of these options. But I am reluctant to argue that they should never, never be considered.’ As my grandmother used to say ‘Never say never!’ Thank you for tackling this issue.”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I have started including a psalm paraphrase for the coming Sunday with my Soft Edges column, on Wednesdays. Why not on Sunday, 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. Or you can subscribe automatically by sending a blank e-mail to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca.

TECHNICAL STUFF

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

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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

- 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 "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.
