

This e-mail is sent only to a voluntary subscriber list. If you no longer wish to receive these weekly columns, send a blank e-mail (no message) to softedges-unsubscribe@quixotic.ca. Or write to me personally, jimt@quixotic.ca

This column was originally written for Sunday August 10, 2014, but because of computer difficulties I was unable to send it out at that time. I think it's a better column than the one I wrote for this Sunday, August 17 – but if you really want to read this weekend's column, you can find it at <http://edges.canadahomepage.net/> anytime after midnight on Saturday.

Fundamentalism at fault, not religious faith

By Jim Taylor

I don't remember who sent me the e-mail; I do remember the message. It listed some countries considered among the world's happiest. The list included Canada and the Scandinavian nations. Then it listed some countries where people were at war with each other or with their own governments: Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Libya, Afghanistan, Somalia...

The e-mail asked: "Did you notice any common characteristics among those countries?"

And promptly answered its own question: "The happy ones are all Christian; the unhappy ones are all Muslim."

I hit the delete button. It was the kind of superficial analysis of complex issues that I despise.

I could have responded, I suppose.

I could have pointed out that 800 or so years ago, the conclusion would have been exactly the opposite. The so-called Christian countries were a morass of prejudice, ignorance, and ruthless oppression. In England, the Magna Carta had not yet been signed; kings had absolute authority over their nobles, their serfs, their slaves.

By contrast, the Islamic countries were models of education, literacy, and architecture. Indeed, if Islam had not preserved and enhanced mathematics and medicine, history and philosophy, the "Christian" west could not have developed as it has.

Reversed situations

Still – if that the e-mail's happy/unhappy distinction has any validity -- what happened to reverse the situation?

In a word, fundamentalism.

During Europe's Dark and Middle Ages, the power structures of the western nations had only one authoritative text, the Bible. They used the Bible to justify anything and everything, from the looting and pillaging of the Crusades to the torture of the Inquisition to the divine rights of kings.

During the same period, the Islamic nations relied on a host of texts. They had Qur'an, yes. They also had the logic of Aristotle, the geometry of Euclid and Ptolemy, the medicine of Maimonides (a Jew) and Hippocrates, the astronomy of Azophi.

Back then, in other words, Islam was open; Christianity was closed.

Today, in most of the western world, religious observance has fallen to record lows. The Bible may be marketed as an all-time best-seller. But it serves as absolute authority in the west only for – you guessed it – fundamentalists.

Meanwhile, in Islamic nations, the Qur'an has become the dominant authority of the domineering classes. It justifies the subjugation of women, the martyrdom of young men, the crushing of free thought.

All books are out of date

This may sound like heresy, coming from an author of 17 books. But I believe the problem is putting your faith in a book. Any book. A book is, necessarily, a snapshot of a state of knowledge at a particular time and place. Whether it's the Bible or Mein Kampf, its message is fixed, sealed, frozen.

I wrote my first book in 1981. I have learned a lot, and grown a lot, in the last 33 years. But those printed words have not changed.

A book resembles Oscar Wilde's "Portrait of Dorian Gray" -- it stays the same while the world grows older and wiser. The Bible has had numerous translations and interpretations. But the accepted text has been locked in since around AD 250. The Qur'an has been mummified since 632.

To place one's reliance on a single text, whether hand copied by monks over centuries or dug out of a hillside in New York, is to close one's eyes and mind to everything else.

Would Karl Marx write exactly the same thing today that he did in 1894? Would Adam Smith? Or Mary Baker Eddy? I doubt it. They were pioneers in their time because they incorporated new understandings into their thinking.

Similarly, I doubt if Jesus, Mohammed, or Baha'u'llah would limit themselves to the same words they uttered back then.

Deliberate rejection

But fundamentalism refuses to entertain new possibilities.

It afflicts both west and east today, although to differing extents. And it is not found only among evangelical denominations in the west. Consider the doxology used by Christian churches worldwide: "As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be..."

Fundamentalism is not even limited to religion. Environmentalists, free-market capitalists, politicians, even scientists, can equally cling to familiar "laws" the way a barnacle clings to pilings.

Fundamentalism can be attractive. It gives people a structure to believe in. It clearly defines moral codes. It frees them from doubt and ambiguity.

It also encourages them to hate those who are different. It demands conformity. Paradoxically, it expects its followers to demonstrate their free will by sacrificing their free will.

If "Christian" nations really are happier than Islamic nations, it's not because they have a superior religion. In Europe and North America, religious attendance has plunged; Islam can claim a far higher rate of daily religious practice.

Rather, it's because the western nations no longer strap themselves into an mental straitjacket. In the west, fundamentalism has been relegated to an increasingly irrelevant fringe; in the east, it has been elevated to a source of power.

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

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

YOUR TURN

Alan Reynolds thought last week's column about the tax audits being performed on charitable organizations that transgressed Stephen Harper's line in the sand sufficiently important that he broke his holiday and forwarded the column to his own mailing list.

I gather I wasn't the only one writing about this subject. Dave Rattray sent along a letter written by Toni Ellis of Elora, Ontario, to the *Globe and Mail*: "Charities can spend only 10% of their budget trying to influence the government. These are organizations working for the public good, funded by citizens who value the work that they do. Professional lobbyists, whose only job is to try to influence the government, work for personal interest and profit, well hidden from the public view. So, if you want the ear of the government, better to be a shareholder than just a stakeholder."

"I don't think I could have put it any better," Dave added. "Certainly not as politely..."

Isabel Gibson responded tersely: "This is the sort of thing that makes me despair of people in power – of whatever initial political stripe. They all seem to find it too easy to slide into pursuing power for its own sake."

Her comment seems especially appropriate on the 50th anniversary of Richard Nixon's resignation, for exactly those reasons.

Charles Hill reminded me that political conservatives are not the only ones applying the audit tactic: "You may be aware that in the United States, there are accusations that the Democratic Party, the current party which more or less controls the governmental programs through appointments, has facilitated vigorous and negative investigations of the tax returns of the conservative Republican Party, a particularly noxious (to liberals) group of politicians. What was that Newtonian law of physics? The party in power tends to stay in power by whatever means are necessary -- and the body out of power gets much more watchful?"

James Russell asked the unthinkable question: "It's such an ugly world, that I wonder if I can really ask this question: Has CRA been investigating possible political activities by any charities that might be closely aligned with Israel (which apparently is Canada's best friend in the world)?"

Heather Nemeth also wondered about international loyalties, and referred to her U.S. situation: "Congress, which cannot agree on anything at all, took all of 5 minutes to vote to send drones to Israel. So few people realize the terrible conditions under which the Palestinians are living and have been living for so long. A task force from our Presbytery went to Palestine before this latest trouble and documented the horrific conditions there. However the vast number of Americans seem to believe that Israel can do no wrong. Some courageous Jews are trying to make changes and help start a peace process, but it is a slow go."

David Gilchrist wanted to follow up on Lloyd Lovatt's comments last week about locusts being inedible: "I remember the Africans in Angola swooping them out of the air and cooking them to eat; so was a bit puzzled by this remark. So I looked on GOOGLE: 'Locusts are edible insects and are considered a delicacy in some countries. There have been references to their consumption as food throughout history. On swarming they are known to produce a toxin that renders them inedible and causes a skin reaction in sunlight.'

"So locusts are definitely edible. I just don't understand how come the Angolans ate them when they were swarming, unless: (a) they were a different variety ;or (b) the Africans just put up with the skin irritation; or (c) there is another factor I can't think of. Does anyone else have an idea?"

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.

Other sources worth pursuing:

- 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.
