

Wednesday January 23, 2013

Home for religious refugees

By Jim Taylor

In the church I attend, at least four key members were once Roman Catholic. I know of two who grew up Mennonite. Half a dozen, I gather, used to be Anglican. There are a few former Baptists and Lutherans, though I don't know how many.

At a guess, less than half the congregation grew up in the United Church of Canada.

We are, in many ways, a congregation of religious refugees.

I include myself in that category, although I belong to the minority that has spent all of its life in the United Church. I find refuge – the point of being a refugee – in this church from the religious rigidity that seems to flood northwards across the border.

Denominational labels don't matter as much as they once did. People go where they feel comfortable. Or, more accurately, they don't go where they feel uncomfortable. Which probably accounts for the growing numbers in the national census who profess “no religion.”

The former Catholics are mainly women, who felt fed up with being treated as second-class Christians. The Baptists – and perhaps the Mennonites – got fed up with having to park their brains at the door when they attended worship.

But the roots of childhood practices run deep. Sometimes it takes very little to rouse ancient prejudices, or to scrape open old scars.

Past, present, and future

My cousin once-removed Andrew Brouse wrote me, several years ago, about exploring his own spiritual genealogy.

“As I explore my traditions,” he wrote, “I can see a partial reflection: The person I am; the person I was; the person I aspire to be.”

Andrew and I share common ancestors – my grandparents, his great-grandparents. John Thompson Taylor was ordained in the Presbyterian Church, went to India with his wife Winnifred as missionaries, switched to the United Church at its founding in 1925...

On his mother's side, Andrew noted, “My mother's mother drew from evangelical Protestant, and possibly some Episcopalian/Catholic traditions.” His mother's father – my uncle, a medical doctor – “derived from mainline Christian traditions.

“In each of these, I can see a partial reflection: The family we are; the family we were; the family we aspire to be.”

Things got more complicated on his father's side. His father's mother was Jewish. Which made his father officially Jewish. But his father's father was distinctly Protestant.

“In each of these traditions,” Andrew mused, “I can see a partial reflection: The people we are; the people we were; the people we aspire to be.”

Today, we hardly notice mixed marriages. Between ethnic groups. Between what we used to call “races.” Even same sex marriages have become relatively commonplace.

But it wasn't very long ago that marriages between religious communities were considered radical. Because they forced at least one member of that family to become a religious refugee, seeking a new home.

I saved Andrew's letter because I liked the way he described us. We are not trapped forever in our ethnic or religious origins. Rather, those origins shape what we are; what we were; and what we aspire to be.

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YOUR TURN

Teachers and ministers alike chimed in about last week's column, on flunking (or not) their pupils/parishioners.

David Boedecker offered a rationale for not flunking: "We pastors who know we are damaged goods can't bring ourselves to flunk people as broken as we are."

Jim Henderschedt added, "The best example we have of the 'minister' who refuses to flunk his pupils can be found in the gospel's witness to the ministry of Jesus the Christ. Even those who would choose to flunk him were still given the benefit of the doubt. If only we would be astute enough to see him as a good role model.

To which Charles Hill added, "Jesus never said, 'Love your neighbor if.....' Jesus even loved the ones torturing him to death.

"Teaching, on the other hand, is a different type of relationship from pastoring, counseling, or friendship. Not everybody who wants to do something has the ability, whether it be neurological or background knowledge. You can present the failure of others to them in a loving manner and perhaps give appropriate guidance to other tasks. In my experience, the most loving and accepting people are those who know they have or have had problems. One of my favorite statements is, 'The most dangerous person you will ever meet is the one who thinks they have never had problems or done anything wrong.'"

Wesley White found a flaw in my argument: "According to [your] definition, intentional interim ministers are not good pastors. A part of their task is to change leadership patterns that have become dysfunctional for the whole congregation. In an evaluation of a system that has enabled shortcomings to flourish, recognition needs to be made that some people's gifts have been misapplied or that their lesser angels have been over-functioning. This listening to the spirit of a congregation as well as to the spirit of individuals is part of the stress of an intentional interim's life (no wonder they are encouraged to have a good pastor/spiritual director). How do you address a pastor who is focused more on the health of a congregation than every member of a congregation, some of whom are misbehaving regarding other members.

"Presuming intransigency on the part of a parishioner, is there time when a good pastor might make a Caiaphas-like judgment that it is better for one parishioner to be failed than for a whole congregation to fail? Or, is their work only to strengthen a congregation so that it, as a larger group, assists someone out of a place of doing public harm? Are such un-welcomed shifts in leadership a giving up on a person, or a possible grace aiding the hearing of a more fruitful call?"

Isabel Gibson mused, "I used to think I was a failure as a teacher because I hated marking -- so much so that it drove me out of the profession. The older I get, the more teachers I find who also hate marking... sort of reassuring, in a way. As for failing at life --- well, don't we all, at some times and to some degree? I don't think I was taught to focus on the positive (not at home, nor at school) but what a wonderful gift it really is."

Eduard Hiebert and Mary Collins both appreciated the column. Eduard described it as "living across the full colour spectrum including to true to life experiences of living in shades of grey..."

Mary called it "very beautiful and helpful."

Laurna Tallman found it relevant to her theories about brain function being related to hearing difficulties: "Newborns come into the world with very little left-brain dominance.... What we call 'original sin' and 'selfishness' is the right brain lacking dominance by the left brain. That condition is extreme at birth and alters constantly via the right ear during a process we call 'maturation.' ...

“Unconditional love is essential to being able to show respect to persons ... However, there is one danger in unconditional love and that is becoming so accepting of the person that one is no longer looking for the means of healing the person’s disability. ... Merely having endless patience with these people is not enough (although many certainly earn their Saint Certificate with the kind of unconditional love you write about). ... We don’t turn ‘endless patience’ on people who are near-sighted or astigmatic; we get glasses for them. [Similarly, we should] make sure that children with audio deficits exercise their ears with high-frequency sound for a few days or weeks or months, and teach them how to keep their ears fit thereafter, and learning ability will have been normalized...”

Janie Wallbrown kept the question of epitaphs and memories going: “One of my ‘shocking’ questions I raise at various inappropriate places such as cocktail parties is, ‘What do you want written on your tombstone?’ My own reply for years has been...’She enjoyed!’ I remind everyone that your personhood is not remembered more than a couple of generations. So....what one word do you wish to drum into that two generations of people to make you memorable? We have an Uncle Asher in my family. Six generations back now but remembered by us all. Why? He ran naked in the snow when he was 104 years old. That’s how he is remembered!”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

The recommended psalm for the Third Sunday after Epiphany is Psalm 19. I think of it as one of the greatest of the psalms (perhaps because I had to memorize it as a boy!).

1 Quarks and electrons, crystals and cells;
stems and trunks and limbs and bodies--
2 on the land, in the water, in the air--
the elements of the universe wait to expand our understanding.
3 Rocks have no words, nor do cells have syllables,
4 yet their message can be read anywhere.
Even the fiery stars,
5 racing at unimaginable speeds through space,
6 yield their secrets to those willing to explore God’s universe.
7 And what do they find?
An underlying harmony, a delicate equilibrium
built on the value of every thing,
living or inanimate, past, present, and future.
8 There are no exceptions.
No one is above the law of interdependence.
9 Life dies and becomes new life;
spirit and flesh are one.
My fate is inextricably linked to yours,
and our fate to the trees and insects.
10 This is the beginning of wisdom.
It is better than wealth, more valuable than possessions.
11 Awareness of it will change you forever.

12 But we are too often blind;
we close our ears to the voices of the winds and the waves,
to the insights of the rocks and the plants.

13 God, keep us from thinking we know it all;
human minds cannot encompass eternity;
an assembly of facts does not equal truth.

14 Keep us always open to wonder, to beauty, to mystery,
O greatest of mysteries.

For this and other paraphrases, you can order *Everyday Psalms* through Wood Lake Publications,
info@woodlake.com or 1-800-663-2775.

HYMNSIGHT

My friend Ralph Milton, who published his Rumors newsletter for many years, has something special for you. It's called HYMNSIGHT, and it's for any church that currently projects the words of hymns and prayers, or plans to.

Ralph writes, Since retiring, I have rediscovered my old love of photography, and found creative use for my pictures in the life of First United where Bev and I worship. Our entire liturgy is projected, so that people read responses and sing hymns from screens. I use my photos to add color, vitality and depth to all the hymns and most of the liturgy.

In the course of this, I have developed slide sets to go with 600 hymns, plus about two thousand slides, in both the standard screen and the newer wide screen shape. You can use all of them, in any way you wish, without permission, and absolutely free, as long as it's non-profit and church related.

All you need to access the website is go to:

<http://www.hymnsight.ca> www.hymnsight.ca

In addition to all that visual material, there's a comprehensive "how-to" manual for those who are new to the idea of using projected visuals in church, and for those who have already begun.

HymnSight provides a set of suggested visuals to go with each hymn, but the words to the hymn are not there, mainly for copyright considerations.

Please take a look to see if this service scratches where you itch. If you think it's worthwhile, please let some of your colleagues in ministry know about it. And if you know of a website that could benefit from a link to HymnSight, why not add it?

Blessings,
Ralph Milton

YOU SCRATCH MY BACK...

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 web links worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap," write reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- 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.

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

I write a second column each Sunday called Sharp Edges, which tends to be somewhat more cutting about social and justice issues. To sign up for Sharp Edges, write to me directly, at jimt@quixotic.ca, or send a note to sharpedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca
