

*Sunday June 15, 2014*

## **Hiding behind comforting words**

By Jim Taylor

Shortly before 2:30 p.m., on Wednesday June 6, Brian Dolman was driving south on Highway 97, coming home from his millwright job in Kamloops, about two hours away.

He didn't want to work away from home. But, as he told me, "I'm 64. There aren't a lot of jobs around for someone my age."

No one knows how, or why, Brian veered across the centre line on the highway and smashed head-on into a northbound pickup truck. The highway curved to the right. Perhaps Brian didn't turn his steering wheel quite enough. Perhaps he was distracted by a fly inside his car. Perhaps he dozed off for an instant.

Whatever the cause, Brian died in the wreckage of his car. The two occupants of the pickup truck he hit were taken to hospital.

By some ghastly coincidence, hours later the same day but in the Atlantic time zone, three RCMP officers were gunned down. Fabrice George Gevaudan, Douglas James Larche, and Dave Joseph Ross were killed in Moncton, New Brunswick.

I simply do not believe that an almighty God planned these deaths. I do not believe that God flipped through a DayTimer and noted that Brian Dolman was scheduled to have a fatal accident. I do not believe that a calendar app on God's iPad indicated that the lifetime warranties for Constables Gevaudin, Larche, and Ross had expired.

Such a God would not be a God, in my opinion, but a monster.

## **Distortion of divinity**

Yet that's the implication of a long-held Christian doctrine called predestination. It argues that God knows everything. Therefore God must know everything that will ever happen, before it happens.

The Westminster Confession, a revered document among Protestant churches, states that God "from all eternity did ...freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass."

In the days when most people believed in a literal heaven above and hell below, predestination contented itself with God deciding, even before people were born, which ones were headed for eternal damnation, which ones for salvation.

In a more benign version of predestination, God gives humans free will to decide for themselves how to act. God does not force people to make certain choices. But in such cases, the argument goes, even though humans can freely make those choices, God already knows what choices they will make.

Are you getting confused yet?

An exaggeration of this doctrine, sometimes called double predestination, argues that God manipulates human life, so that God actively causes selected people to sin – and then punishes them for doing it.

Predestination also underlies the anti-evolution argument of Intelligent Design. Life is so complex, its advocates state, that it could not have come about by chance. A much greater mind than ours must have designed it, so that it would work out exactly the way it has.

## Broken hearts

All these theories, whether appealing or appalling, make God into a heartless manager. To use a metaphor popular a few years ago, God wound up the universe eons ago, like a divine watchmaker, and set it ticking along through eternity. And if a few people get crushed in the watch's gears – like Brian Dolman and the Moncton RCMP officers – you can't expect the universe to stop just because a few individuals got in the way, can you?

Ten days after his son, Alex, died when his car skidded off a dock into Boston harbour, the senior minister of Riverside Church in New York attacked the notion that God orchestrates tragedies.

"Nothing so infuriates me," William Sloan Coffin Jr. said, "as the incapacity of seemingly intelligent people to get it through their heads that God doesn't go around this world with his fingers on triggers, his fists around knives, his hands on steering wheels. God is dead set against all unnatural deaths.

"The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is 'It is the will of God.' My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first heart to break."

There are, in fact, many things that should not be said when someone dies. Such as, "God called him home." Or, "God must have loved him very much to take him from us." Brian's house in Oyama wasn't really his home? His wife Madeleine, his sons Sean and Colin, didn't love him enough to deserve keeping him?

Such comments do not offer consolation. Rather, they are a way, as Coffin put it, in which people use "comforting words for self-protection, to pretty up a situation whose bleakness they simply couldn't face."

It's an attempt to work backwards from an effect to find a cause. Because it's too painful to accept that for some events, there is no cause. No reason. No explanation. Just loss.

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## YOUR TURN

Last week, I challenged us to find significant markers that would help us to objectively assess risks and habits. Chris Duxbury wrote about her experience in Australia: "In the state of Victoria where I live the big marker for bad driving on the road is speed. It [the mantra that "speed kills"] does not take into account where we are driving at the time. Open highway or school zone, is irrelevant. Speed kills. But as you say this is a fallacy.

"Unfortunately the driving force, pardon the pun, is about revenue collection. This is being reinforced by the array of hidden speed cameras that allow drivers to clock up hefty fines without being physically pulled over and told you are speeding, so slow down and along with this get the chance to redeem yourself and become a safe driver once again. The powers at be are now looking at a no tolerance stance, which means that going 51 kms in a 50 km zone incurs a hefty fine. This does not take into account that speedometers can be out 5 km.

"While I love Australia I wish our legislators would rethink the markers they use for determining road safety, or even the fines it disperses for driving infringements."

Isabel Gibson commented, "I read an article last week that correlated cynicism at 65 with increased risk Alzheimer's at 75 -- or something like that. Of course, some think that not to be cynical about people (or governments, or politicians, or politicians of the stripe other than theirs, or businesses) is a marker for delusion bordering on dementia....

"I like the idea of trying to find independent markers for the lives we want to want to lead, if you see what I mean. I remember someone suggesting that we could track where our time goes -- we do pretty well at budgeting/tracking money, but our time is at least as precious."

Laurina Tallman found last week's column "hilarious as well as disturbing..."

"The speed at which you drive surely has some relationship to the steadiness of the hand upon the controls, and hence to the age (for reflexes; for experience) of the driver, and to the terrain habitually travelled. Driving in the Charlottesville/Blue Ridge in Virginia for a year was not only hair-raising for the ups, downs, and curves of the terrain but for the two-lane, shoulder-less roads, heavy traffic, fervent cyclists claiming the outer two inches of pavement, frequent and sudden deer crossings, densely wooded areas bordering the roads that obscured driveways for vehicles entering or leaving the road, and precipitous drop-offs. This challenge is not to be compared, however, with the skills needed for crossing an intersection in India, which has multiple unmarked lanes and traffic that can include rickshaws and elephants. Imagine attaching test devices to rickshaw drivers and elephants!"

Laurina quoted me line, "The measurements we choose say more about our own obsessions than about the society they attempt to measure."

"I'll bet you're right on that score most of the time," she concluded, "but I'm not sure how to measure your success rate."

William Ball was catching up on some unread columns, and came across the one where I had said, "I think we do have to guard our speech even in private. Not because of punitive implications, but because as we guard our speech, so do we also discipline our thoughts."

This "seems at odds with your later column on Prince Charles and his 'private' comments with regard to Putin. What are the criteria one should use as to when to guard and when not to guard -- when is private just that, private?"

In today's context, where listening devices may pick up your conversation anywhere, where blogs and tweets can go around the world in instants, and where NSA and others seem to have unlimited freedom to eavesdrop on anyone, I would have to argue that there is no such thing as truly private speech any more. But I would still maintain that the speaker's intent, and the context of the words, need to be considered when evaluating those words. Casual chat should not be construed as public policy.

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#### 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](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

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

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