

Sunday March 9, 2014

By Jim Taylor

There's no column today. This last week, the crisis in Ukraine has dominated the news, but I simply haven't been able to wrap my mind around the situation.

Back in the 1970s, when the Cold War threatened Mutually Assured Destruction and my daughter's generation was convinced they wouldn't live long enough to become adults, I remember telling a colleague that we weren't entering World War III but the first World Civil War.

Around that time North and South Vietnam were at war. Cambodia and Laos were either having a civil war or getting ready for one. In Africa, the countries of Kenya, Mozambique, Somalia, Ethiopia, Uganda, and the Congo were all fighting with rebel forces. India and Pakistan – which had once been a single country -- brandished nuclear weapons at each other.

Since then, if memory serves correctly, there has not been a single year when no country was having an internal war.

Most recently the “Arab Spring” has settled into sectarian conflict in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Iraq...

It looked, for a while, as though Ukraine would explode into another civil war, with the Euro-oriented western half battling the Russian-speaking eastern half. It may still break into armed conflict, if Crimea votes to secede.

I rather basked in the glow of having been prophetic, 40 years ago. But with Russian troops taking over military bases within Ukraine and massing equipment along Ukraine's borders, and with the U.S. dispatching air and naval power into adjoining areas, I'm no longer as sure I was right. Despite diplomatic negotiations, World War suddenly seems much closer again.

It's ironic that this should be in Crimea. The Crimean War, a century ago, pitted western armies against Russian forces in one of the most futile wars ever fought. Although it gave us the noble example of Florence Nightingale, it also gave us the suicidal Charge of the Light Brigade.

The words of Tennyson's poem seem hauntingly apropos still:

*Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.*

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YOUR TURN

I rather expected that a column on ending life would generate some strong responses. I was not mistaken.

Retired nurse Bev Ireland wrote, “I will not go into the many, many reasons I disagree with euthanasia. However, I do take issue with your reference to Palliative Care. You stated you did not want to be kept alive just to be kept alive. The goal of Palliative Care is ‘Neither to hasten or prolong the process of dying.’ The team tries in every way

possible to make death as normal and as pain free an experience for patient and family as is possible within the realms of our current knowledge.”

Dave Sherman supported Bev’s point: “You said ‘I’m not convinced [palliative care] can overcome the feeling of uselessness’. In my experience, it can. What it can’t do is force people to understand that dying is a process that cannot be timed, scheduled, or otherwise controlled. In a world we think we can control (trying to live out the first creation story of Genesis), dying is a process over which we have no control. And many of us hate that feeling and find it deeply threatening.

“I stand with Dr. David Balfour Mount on this one. The proposed Quebec law is a sign of our failure, not our success. Good palliative care makes such laws unnecessary. Our politicians won’t put palliative care on the public agenda for funding; only aiding the committing of suicide. Our politicians have failed us.”

Isabel Gibson thanked me for “a ‘low-heat’ addition to the euthanasia conversation (per Woodrow Wilson’s injunction to supply light, not heat). I don’t know if your argument is right in the sense of capturing the divide; I do know that it’s right in the sense of talking about this emotional and value-laden issue in a reasonable way.

“I sometimes wonder what opponents of assisted suicide think we’re doing now, with morphine administered in palliative care for pain control. No, it’s not the same as intentionally administering a lethal dose. But as I understand it, morphine also suppresses breathing, perhaps offering a faster, gentler end than many might otherwise have. And thank God for that.

“I guess that puts me in the ‘basically good’ belief camp, eh?”

Laurina Tallman chastised me: “By favouring euthanasia you are promoting an unhealthy end-of-life agenda.” [JT, defensively: I wasn’t favouring euthanasia. I was trying to identify the feelings that cause us either to favour or reject it.]

Laurina continued, “Everything we have learned about palliative care, which has allowed terminally ill patients to spend their last months and days BEING USEFUL because interaction with other humans is meaningful, has been learned because those people were not helped to a quick exit. Impatience is not a virtue.

“Sue Rodrigues said clearly that she wouldn’t be asking for assisted suicide if she had a supportive husband. Her husband had divorced her during the onset of her illness and she had no other family to turn to.”

Alan Reynolds thought my analysis was too “black and white...” Alan cited the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr, “that largely forgotten 20th century theologian” and quoted the opening paragraphs of Niebuhr’s book *Human Nature*: “If he (sic) believes himself to be essentially good and attributes the admitted evils of human history to specific social and historical causes, he involves himself in begging the question; for all those specific historical causes of evil are revealed, upon close analysis, to be no more than particular consequences and historical configurations of evil tendencies in man himself. They cannot be understood at all if a capacity for, and inclination toward, evil in man himself are not presupposed. If, on the other hand, man comes to pessimistic conclusions about himself, his capacity for such judgments would seem to negate the content of the judgments. How can man be ‘essentially’ evil if he knows himself to be so? What is the character of the ultimate subject, the quintessential ‘I’, which passes such devastating judgments upon itself as object?”

Judyth Mermelstein although thought I might have overstated my case: “I’m not entirely convinced that belief in inherent goodness is what underlies approval of medically-assisted suicide, or that belief in inherent evil is behind its opponents.

“Most people here in Quebec (even the semi-lapsed Catholic majority) simply acknowledge that all lives end, often very painfully, regardless of sophisticated medical interventions. Anyone who has had the experience of watching a relative or friend die a slow, painful death wouldn’t wish it on their worst enemy. As things stand, even when a patient is begging for release, the Hippocratic oath holds most doctors back from prescribing enough

morphine to adequately control the pain because high doses also suppress breathing and thus hasten death. Of course, that doesn't happen with proper palliative care, but we all know there aren't anywhere near enough palliative beds to meet the need.

"We also know that not all patients want their lives prolonged at the cost of spending their last days drugged into coma or drowning in their own body fluids. Suicide is an option for many -- but not once one lands in a hospital or becomes too weak to move. We can imagine ourselves in that position and, knowing that the means for a quick, painless and relatively dignified exit are at hand, we would like to think human beings should be treated as mercifully as we do our pet dogs and cats when they reach that point--especially since we humans can **ask** for that mercy as our pets cannot. Province-wide consultations confirmed that the Quebec public favours medically-assisted suicide for terminal patients *who ask for it*, but does not favour euthanasia, where the decision to end life would be made by others.

"The strongest resistance to the proposed law came, not from the religious (though they spoke out, too) but from the many people with disabilities who fear euthanasia would be imposed on the disabled and from some medical personnel who believe it their job to prolong life at all costs.

"At my age, I'm fairly convinced that most people are basically decent but all too prone to rationalize what is convenient for them..."

Charles Hill took issue with a word I had used, "inherently."

"Are we born a blank state?" Charles asked. "What about genetics? Very recently there was a report that geneticists have discovered that certain parts of a brain can create 'psychopaths,' people without conscience, and inherited genetics are involved. This 'bent' to evil is irrespective to wealth, position, race, or any other category. A long time ago someone suggested that we are all born with a 'god gene,' given the prevalence of God worship in some form. Maybe they were right, except for psychopaths. I don't believe that we are 'inherently' anything. Genetics and/or environment control our behavior."

Steve Roney challenged my logic: "You are falling for the fallacy of the false alternative, and as a result your take on Catholic theology is radically wrong. It is entirely possible for humans to be both inherently good and inherently sinful, and that is the Catholic position. Being good does not imply perfection. In fact, only God is perfect. Therefore, good people sin. Conversely, having sinned does not make you a bad person."

Lyle Phillips came up with an angle I hadn't thought of. He agreed with me, that "I don't want to be kept alive, just to be kept alive."

"But then," he added, "I realize that when I die, so does my pension. My wife does not have a private pension so she would have to live on her OAS and CPP which doesn't amount to much as she spent most of her earning years raising our children. So I have mixed feelings about being kept alive."

TECHNICAL STUFF

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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...

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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;
- 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.
