

Sunday October 25, 2015

The theology behind Harper's loss

By Jim Taylor

In the week following the Canadian federal election, a multitude of political pundits have analyzed Justin Trudeau's victory. In fact, by Saturday, I was getting as tired of political autopsies as I had been of political campaigning before the election.

There hasn't been as much analysis of what the Conservatives did wrong. As of Monday night, Stephen Harper was old news.

I believe we can still learn something from Harper's defeat. Indeed, I don't think Trudeau won, as much as Harper lost. Harper had generated so much antipathy that any credible alternative would have won.

My own riding used to be considered so conservative that, as the local daily paper joked, they could have run a crash-test dummy as a Conservative candidate and still won. Not any more. Ron Cannan was defeated because of his association with an unpopular leader, not because of any personal inadequacies.

Obscure German theologian

I find an explanation for the hostility to Harper in the work of an obscure German/Jewish philosopher – obscure only because most Canadians have never heard of him.

The writer was Martin Buber. Because of his Jewish ancestry, Buber fled from Hitler's Germany in 1938, settling in Jerusalem long before it became the state of Israel.

In 1923, while still an honorary professor at the University of Frankfurt am Main, Buber published an essay titled "Ich und Du" – later translated into English as "I and Thou." Buber's German "du" connotes an intimacy, a closeness, a mutuality – a friendship rather than a superior/inferior relationship.

That single essay has had a profound influence on psychology and theology.

Essentially, Buber argued that humans – the "I" of his title – live in relationships. Relationships with other humans, of course. But also with the non-human world.

When we treat others as objects that we can use, exploit, or control for our own purposes, we set up an "I-it" relationship. We can measure those objects, weigh them, describe them, define them, employ them. We think we know them. But we don't treat them as having any value in themselves.

On the other hand, when we accept that others have their own intrinsic value, their own rights, their own life and beauty and purpose, we enter an "I-thou" relationship.

You can see where I'm going with this.

Everything becomes an "it"

I believe that Stephen Harper's unpopularity derived, in hindsight, from his tendency to treat everything as an "I-it" relationship. If he has "I-thou" relationships, he restricts them to his private life.

When four-year-old Alan Kurdi drowned on a beach in Turkey, Canadians expected a humanitarian response from Ottawa. They saw Alan and his fellow refugees as a "thou," deserving compassion. Harper saw them as numbers, cost, and security risks. Little Alan become an "it."

The niqab issue turned Muslim women into an "it" to be discussed and debated, but not a "thou" to be understood and cared about.

Enemies are always "it." So Harper's opposition parties were not respected as responsible members working for their constituencies. They were an "it" -- obstacles to Harper's vision for re-making the country.

Harper viewed Alberta's massive oil sands as a resource to be exploited. He refused to consider the potential impact of mining that oil, and of encouraging further use of fossil fuels, on tomorrow's children. He chose an "I-it" relationship over "I- thou."

He attached no value to centuries of carefully compiled statistics, millions of volumes of Canadian creativity, and world-renowned research facilities. As an "it," they were disposable, expendable.

Veterans were not "thou" who had suffered physical and psychological losses while serving their country; they were an economic liability, an "it."

Human and divine

Evangelicals generally consider Stephen Harper as one of their own. If so, Harper will certainly have an "I-thou" born-again relationship with God and/or Jesus. It's a basic criterion for being an evangelical.

Unfortunately, some evangelicals believe that as long as you have an "I-thou" relationship with God, that's all you need. You're saved. Nothing else matters.

Buber would not agree. Because he refused to assign limits or boundaries to God, an "I-thou" relationship with other earthly entities also invoked an "I-thou" relationship with God.

But it didn't work in reverse. Having a close relationship with God didn't necessarily equate to loving and compassionate relationships with other humans. Or with the natural world.

I think the growing antipathy to Stephen Harper derived from a growing awareness among Canadian voters that he saw them as an "it" to be managed and controlled. Not as a "thou" to be cherished and nurtured.

Even if they had never heard of Martin Buber.

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YOUR TURN

In last week's column, about the behavior of (relatively) wealthy western migrants to Asian and African countries, I made frequent use of the editorial "we" – referring to Canadians in general, I suppose.

Isabel Gibson challenged that usage: "Who is 'we,' I wonder?"

"I'd guess that many Canadians (maybe most) are uncomfortable with and even worried about isolationism in some few immigrants to this country, disgusted by sexual predation of anyone (minors or not) in any country, and not very aware of the costs to local communities (here and abroad) of living in luxury and/or as an absentee landowner.

"I'd like some more evidence please, sir. Barring that, it's one sweeping generality against another, isn't it? Kinda tough when one [of those] is also a damning generality.

"Good for journalists for exposing abuses and consequences; not good when we all get lumped into the same pot and/or kettle.

"And I'm just wondering -- does the fact that the middle-aged men preying on children have beer bellies make what they do worse, somehow, or is it just an expression of Vltchek's contempt, meant to add heat, not light, to the conversation?"

Cliff Boldt liked the analogy of the pot calling the kettle black: "This column resonates in Canada where we are at the end of the longest election in recent Canadian history, where immigration has made an appearance as a nasty and racist binge by at least one political party."

Hanny Kooyman asked, "Who is to assimilate into which culture? Only those who happen to live within the circles of today's world's power can require many to leave behind and/or ignore their own precious culture. All of us will become much poorer because of this cookie cutter system that overrules and tramples on too many micro-cultures. The system of sameness is doing humanity harm in ways that we cannot yet foresee. It is recognized by too few -- to make it possible to turn things around in such a way so that broader understanding into varied ways of living could indeed create another more humane world, where many diverse cultures can live together; and so become one richly diverse world. There is much to learn."

On the subject of our recent Canadian federal election, Jorgen Hansen wrote to new Prime Minister Justin Trudeau: "First, congratulations on running a clean election—no smut to the others. No fear mongering either."

He saw Trudeau's theme as "Dare to be different" and added, "I would dare you to hire Tom Mulcair and Elisabeth May for your postings in cabinet—use them instead of fighting with them. They have talent that will help you."

What a radical idea...

The column two weeks ago about guns and the NRA prompted Dave Olson to write, "Well said! One of the best arguments I've heard or read. Thanks for your compassionate and accurate commentary."

The following week, I had commented that I hadn't received even one death threat as a result. Ted Wilson took up the challenge: "I am a slow typist and composer so I haven't finished yet but I will not disappoint you."

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 jjmt@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

PROMOTION STUFF...

- Ralph Milton has a new project, called Sing Hallelujah – the world's first video hymnal. It consists of 100 popular hymns, both new and old, on five DVDs that can be played using a standard DVD player and TV screen, for use in congregations who lack skilled musicians to play piano or organ. More details at www.singhallelujah.com
Ralph's HymnSight webpage is still up, <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.)
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town – not particularly religious, but fun; alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
- Tom Watson writes a weekly blog called "The View from Grandpa Tom's Balcony" – ruminations on various subjects, and feedback from Tom's readers. Write him at tomwatso@gmail.com or watson@sentex.net
