“Secularity - opportunity or peril for religions?”

30.04.2014 | Alexandra Hawryluk

What intrigued me was the theme of the Aix-en-Province conference: “Secularity - opportunity or peril for religions?” In the spring of 2013, at a conference on Religion and Canadian Public Discourse at McGill University in Montreal, participants were asked to think about how we’re “Bridging the Secular Divide”. Both themes seemed to be suggesting that the differences between those, who are saying that the public square is no place for religion, and those who are encouraging people to bring their religious values into the public square, might be too great to be reconciled.

I wonder, are things really that bad or that clear-cut? The policeman, who guided me back to the right bus line when I lost my way on the day of Tour de France was most probably exercising the kindness his Catholic mother taught him. The state school principal whose school does not allow students to wear religious symbols, goes to church on Sunday. True enough, the bridge, if there is one, between secular hard liners and religious fundamentalists keeps getting longer and longer.

The ICCJ conference, however, cast a new light on all these thoughts. The gathering in Aix-en-Province with its willingness to listen, to welcome new insights, to rise to new challenges and above all, the opportunity it offered for personal friendship, was an amazing grace.

The differences in perceptions of people from different cultures were interesting and stimulating. Had I reviewed French history before travelling, I would not have been surprised by Bishop Claude Dagens saying, that Catholics in France have always felt threatened by the state. Contrary to what proponents of laicité say, Monsignor Dagens, who’s a member of the prestigious Academie Francaise, thought that Western society has been weakened because people have abandoned God. All that`s left, is nostalgia for a sense of belonging to a community, nostalgia for participation in the faith of past generations and a longing for being able to participate in history. In his view, secularism and relativism are killing religion.

His respondent, Rabbi Haim Korsia, the Grand Rabbi and Chaplain with the Armed Forces of France, was more optimistic. Because laicité puts all religions into one box, it creates an opportunity for an exchange of knowledge and friendship between religions, something that did not happen earlier in history. He felt, that people of faith are decidedly not irrelevant to modernity because, as he put it: “Faith obliges me to follow God’s commandments, which means improving society”. But, he cautioned, secularism must be well-defined because what the secular state and people of faith do together, matters.

With all this talk about how bad secularism could be for religion I was curious to hear the discussion at a workshop entitled “Is Israel a secular state?” The seminar room was packed as Dr. Raymond Cohen, Harvard graduate and professor of International Relations at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, opened the session with a comment on the status of civil marriage in Israel. Although the state recognizes civil marriages performed in other countries, no civil marriages are done in Israel. That’s because according to the law, only Orthodox rabbis can perform marriage ceremonies. So, no inter-faith marriage either. People in the room began to mention other anomalies caused by the tension between the values of a secular democratic state and those of orthodox religion: women not being allowed to ride in the front of the bus, men and women being separated at public events like a documentary film presentation. The consensus, however, was

that the country functions like a post-Enlightenment secular state, with the difference that it also honours Sabbath rules.

The next workshop for me was “New Paths: Re-framing Israel’s Narrative in North America” with Dr. Peter Pettit, professor of Religious Studies at the Muhlenberg Lutheran College in Pennsylvania. He started out by asking: “What do you tell people when you come back from Israel?” The answers he got illustrated how little Christians know about the country and its important issues: the Shoah, the law of return, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the mystical meaning of the land. He recommended that anyone interested in Israel ought to use intra-Jewish information materials or to take courses like those his college offered.

Tying into these topics was Dr. Cohen’s plenary lecture entitled “Promise, Land, and Hope”, a brilliant description of the reasons why The Holy Land is holy, not just to the followers of Jesus Christ, but to all Jews. Citing the biblical text in which God promised the land of Israel to Abraham, Dr. Cohen explained that this eternal heritage, passed on and sanctified by each successive generation, is the frame of reference for all endeavours of the Jewish people. He then went on to trace the development of Zionist thought starting with the Odessa-born writer and revisionist Vladimir Zhabotinski, who in the aftermath of World War I made a proposal to the British to create a Jewish Legion which would help in the creation of the future Jewish homeland. The clear exposition of the evolution of Zionist thought, the ideas of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, particularly Rabbi Abraham Isaac, son of Rabbi Hakohen Kook, was something that is seldom heard outside the Jewish community.

In contemporary times, there are two Zionist ideologies: that of the Likoud Revisionists and that of the Labour Zionists, for both of whom the Land remains central. It is this conviction that obliges Jews to work the land, build and settle on the land, develop their culture in that land. If the belief in the holiness of the Land of Israel is as deeply held, as professor Cohen stated, then the creation of two separate states may be too complex to be easily realized.

Perhaps the most interesting question at the conference was: Can modernity survive without religion? Gilles Bourquin - University of Lausanne Ph.D. in theology and editor of *La Vie Protestante* published in Berne, Switzerland - convinced me that modernity probably does need religion, for otherwise, what would it be reacting against? He thinks that “we should admit [that] these two spheres inevitably overlap and that a religious influence always remains in the secular sphere.” And that sphere is usually multicultural, which for someone living in multicultural Canada sounds reassuring. He also believes that the process of secularization can change the thinking of faith communities, “by injecting a liberal mentality which challenges some aspects of traditional orthodoxies”. But couldn’t injecting some aspects of faith-based mentality, challenge political orthodoxies too?

What was interesting was that most presenters seemed to be speaking from the perspective of their country’s dominant cultural elite. Few were making room for observations on immigrants, the integration process or the immigrants’ need to hang on to their homeland identity before assimilating into the host society. Yet immigration from non-European countries is the source of tension in France, Germany, the UK, Denmark, as well as in the province of Quebec in Canada. I also think that the immigrant’s fear of losing her identity in the sometimes confusing foreign circumstances ought to be taken into account when talking about accommodation. And then, there is the fear of the cultural baggage the new immigrant is bringing into the host society. Neither the issue of women’s rights or what organized religion can do for the abused was given enough attention. These possibly contentious subjects, as well as a look at the role of religion in the development of post-communist society, could be interesting topics for exploration in the future.

ICCJ, the Social Opportunity

Although the lectures and workshops were undoubtedly the most important part of the program, everyone looked forward to the socializing.. Every day, for three days we had breakfast together in our hotel and rode in the chartered buses together to the former Roman Catholic seminary, La Baume, for the presentations, lunch and coffee. There were people from the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, France, Poland, Italy, the United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand - some 20 countries in all. It was a great pleasure to talk to so many highly intelligent, creative, interesting people and to discover how many concerns we all had in common.

But by the second day, my table hopping came to an end, as I was adopted by a group of delightful and very insightful men and women, mostly from the UK. It was evident from their quiet confidence and a sense of inner calm, that these were people who don’t talk about their faith because they’re too busy living it. Conversations were easy, fast paced, funny and meaningful. We talked about heritage, identity, assimilation, religion in education, attitude of organized religion to women, fundamentalism, family, what we found lacking in our society and what brought us to the conference.

I particularly cherish the memory of breakfast with Avril, a beautiful young woman from Jerusalem. It was the last day of our conference and this awareness was opening us up to a frank exchange of views on life issues. When we both realized that our families had travelled along parallel roads of suffering, persecution and death, we were simply two women reaching out to each other for understanding and friendship: a Jewish woman and a Ukrainian Canadian woman sharing an unforgettable moment.

She asked me to repeat the end of the story I had been telling the night before at our supper table. I was surprised, because it was the life story of the head of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, Cardinal Yosyf Slypyi, whose church was outlawed by Communists in 1946 and who was incarcerated in the Soviet Gulag for 18 years without ever renouncing his faith in God. This man, freed in time for Vatican II on the intervention of President Kennedy and Pope John XXIII, but forbidden to return to his homeland, did not retire into the Italian countryside outside Rome as the Soviets expected, but dedicated himself to building up his church outside Ukraine. Avril wanted to hear the words with which I ended the story the day before. So, I repeated them: “his suffering and his steadfastness are a symbol of hope to all people of faith.” The rabbis who in the face of a fiery death continued to console their flock, the priests who prayed with fellow prisoners out on the frozen taiga of the Gulags or the women who despite Soviet persecution taught their children the meaning of prayer - these are the people whose abiding faith made horrific circumstances bearable. It is no surprise that their lives have become the measurement of our potential for good.

Bridging the Divide in Ukraine

If I were sitting at that table in Aix today, I would be obliged to add that it is the men and women in Ukraine’s Maidan - now the most public of public squares - the Ukrainian Christians, the Ukrainian Jews and the Ukrainian Muslims standing together against a corrupt regime that has made the difference. During the long stand-off with the government no synagogue, mosque or church (outside a couple of cases of graffiti) was dishonoured. When the Yanukovych government officials tried to break up the protest by ordering the security forces to fire at the crowd, the first victim of that sniper fire was a young Armenian. In the next burst of fire, among the 100 people killed there were three Jewish men. The moral power of that ultimate sacrifice, the steadfastness and the restraint of all those who gathered in Independence Square is what has won the respect and support of democratically minded people around the world for the Ukrainian cause.

This spontaneous unity of Ukrainian citizens is a strong counter against Putin’s propaganda machine and its reprehensible stories about the ostensible rise of nationalistic extremism and racial

intolerance in Ukraine. Vitaly Portnikov, an award-winning journalist working in Ukraine and a contributor to Radio Free Europe, wrote on March 26, 2014 on *Eurozine* that this propaganda will not stop because “it is part of Kremlin’s strategy to discredit the Ukrainian revolution, delegitimize the new government and destabilize the country.” The remarkable thing is that this new, inter-ethnic, inter-faith, democratic Ukrainian movement has successfully challenged the political orthodoxies of a powerful autocratic regime and its president, who had enjoyed Putin’s support. As Mr. Portnikov writes: “This is something that the Russian political elite, Soviet to its core... is unable to comprehend. It perceives this process of establishing a new political nation in Ukraine as a triumph of an ‘ethnic revolution’ and does not notice that the Maidan revolution is political and has opened Ukraine’s way to modernity.”

It is also important to note that for one moment in history, the participants of Maidan have challenged the notion that the pursuit of self-determination and the building of a new democratic order are purely secular matters. The pastors of Ukraine went down into the Maidan, buried the dead, comforted the grieving, helped the wounded, counselled the troubled. When the smoke cleared at the barricades, they continued to stand by their people without seeking any political influence or status for themselves. And the people were grateful for this support. This quiet, respectful cooperation between political activists and representatives of organized religion, goes to show that it is possible for secularism and religion to become complementary forces working together, each in its own sphere, for the good of all society. Now, we will have to wait and see how the process of creating a new democracy in Ukraine, rebuilding its ailing economy and containing Russian aggression will be sustained by Ukraine’s western allies.

What does all of this have to do with the ICCJ conference in Aix-en -Province? On the surface, not much. On a closer look, it’s easy to see a link to ICCJ objectives. These events, the support for Maidan of the Ukrainian Jewish community and its appeal to the Knesset for an impartial attitude towards Ukraine, the humanitarian aid offered by Ukraine’s faith communities and more importantly, the commitment to fair-mindedness of all those who are engaged in the dialogue on the future of Ukraine, impel me to think that faith and its obligation to treat others with respect, (translated into laws safeguarding human rights) can have a positive impact on what is happening in the public square. And that engenders the hope that even long-standing, complex conflicts may in time be resolved, that things may not be as bleak as they sometimes appear to be. We are building bridges.

Alexandra Hawryluk was a longtime religion and social issues reporter at Radio Canada International. Currently she is working on a book and is a member of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue of Montreal.