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OPINIONS

Advent Peace

—Alissa Wilkinson—

Yesterday was the second Sunday of Advent, and the candle we light that day stands for peace.

I was thinking about peace, especially the idea of “peace time”—that is, the time when there are no violent conflicts in which we’re directly engaged. To be honest, I don’t know if we’re in peace time or not down here in the U.S.—and not just because of the conflicts we’re engaged in around the world, but because, well, there’s a lot of unrest here.

Peace—and I looked this up on Wikipedia, don’t tell my students—is this:

A state of harmony characterized by the lack of violent conflict. Commonly understood as the absence of hostility, peace also suggests the existence of healthy or newly healed interpersonal or international relationships, prosperity in matters of social or economic welfare, the establishment of equality, and a working political order that serves the true interests of all. In international relations, peacetime is not only the absence of war or conflict, but also the presence of cultural and economic understanding and unity.

That’s the definition of *shalom*, if we remember too that this is something that only comes through the grace of God. We explored this broader definition of peace in our latest print edition of *Comment*, and in the editorial we framed it this way:

We can also make the bold claim that there is such a thing as “the good society,” in which peace and justice reign.

Peace, as St. Augustine says, is more than simply the absence of war. It is the tranquility of order—when all of the spheres of society function in such a way as to create wonderful music. And this is a radical, prophetic notion: To speak of peace and a tranquil order in a world plagued by restlessness and extreme social disorder is, again, to canoe against the current of reality.

To dare to speak this way is to hope. It presumes that there is an order, and that there can be peace. So here we return to one of *Comment*’s deepest themes: The good society, as St. Augustine says, has not only its institutions, but its loves in order. No society can be “good” unless it helps its people direct their love toward the common good—and the highest good: the love of God.

Our hearts are restless until they are at rest in God, and our society will likewise never fully realize a sense of the tranquility of order until all of our work, our institutions, and our culture are marked by the love of God.

Or, as yesterday’s lectionary readings say:

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry out to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins . . . Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it.

Brotherhood and Everlasting History

—Peter Menzies—

The first time I understood my life and my connection to the continuum that a family represents was in the hours following the birth of my daughter some 26 years ago. The occasion elevated me from the status of boy to man, from husband to father and in the hours after I recall standing on the deck—a glass of strong drink in my hand—staring at the stars and realizing that now, I understood.

Everything. This was a day that my father, grandfathers, great grandfathers, and all before had shared. Now we were all connected by a history that even had I wished to I could not escape. This dawn of fatherhood had brought them alive to me in a manner that changed my perspective on life. I was now part of a brotherhood of fatherhood.

A similar epiphany took place last week when a story appeared in the *Ottawa Citizen* about a group of people in Gainsborough, England, searching for the relatives of a couple of First World War Canadian aviators killed in action while defending Britain against German Zeppelin bombing raids. One of those young men was Lt. J.A. (Arthur) Menzies, my grandfather’s younger brother and one of five Menzies boys and one girl raised in the home of Peter and Isabella Menzies in Ottawa. The reason for the search was that the grave markers, lovingly cared for by the commu-

nity for the past 94 years, require some repairs and the kind folks of Gainsborough needed the family’s permission to do so. We were immediately in touch and of course granted permission and offered to contribute to the cause.

Only one of the young Lt. Menzies’ brothers—my grandfather—had a son. He was named, as you might expect, Arthur, in memory of the dashing young aviator who gave his life for King and country at the age of 22. Arthur is also one of my middle names and is also one of my son’s middle names. My son is 22.

We had known of Lt. J.A. Menzies but much of the young man’s story was hazy and lost in the fog of time. But in the days that followed last week’s story and contact with the good folks in Gainsborough, the story burst to life. Suddenly I was over at my mother’s house, copying every photo that survived and sharing them with folks in England. My brother found the old photo of Lt. Menzies and his gunner airborne over England in their FE2, push-prop fighter bomber, and details emerged about the Royal Flying Corps’ 33 Squadron and its collection of South Africans, Britons, Canadians, Argentinians, and Australians that must, in their day, have carried the sort of swagger that modern society reserves—or at least reserves—for astronauts. Despite the fact that Lt. Menzies’ aviator’s certificate was issued by Britain’s “sporting authority,” these were clearly men on the cutting edge of technology in their time.

Youtube clips of FE2s in action emerged. Press reports of the air battle that ensued and more pictures and stories criss-crossed the Atlantic all week as we discovered more, not only about our ancestor but about his friends, life in 1917, and the townsfolk who have so kindly honored their sacrifice for the better part of a century. We uncovered more details about his brothers on the front, his sister, his mother and father. They were all not just alive again in our memories. I realized they were alive again in us and that young Lt. Menzies was, in his 22 years, twice the man I’ll ever be. And so were his brothers, raised with a set of values that formed a rock-ribbed strength of character. Best known was another of the aviator’s older brothers, Rev. Major Albert Percy Menzies, awarded the Military Cross for bravery for his actions at Vimy Ridge but who went on to be one of Ottawa’s longest-serving Presbyterian clergymen after the war. It was their faith, it turns out, that forged not just their character, but their courage. None of us can say we inherited those qualities. But the meaning of the words on the cross above the young man’s final resting place are written in the stone of a family’s and a culture’s everlasting history.

“If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.”

Some things are eternal.

Giving Drunk Driving Laws a Breathalyzer

—Ray Pennings—

Just in time for the holiday season, an impassioned debate is taking place in our legislatures, courts, and op-ed pages regarding drinking and driving laws.

The arguments on either side of the debate are familiar. Those in favour of toughening the law point to the fact that deaths by drunk driving have been reduced by 40% in British Columbia since it passed its law in September 2010. In other words, “it works,” so don’t fix it. Those opposed to this legislation note that it comes with a significant extension of arbitrary police powers and huge potential for unfairness. Last week, the B.C. Supreme Court agreed, noting the law’s arbitrary appeal process is “seriously flawed,” with citizens having no effective recourse (and facing huge financial and reputational consequences) to appeal either defective equipment or policing errors.

I have no sympathy for impaired drivers, and believe the state has a legitimate interest and responsibility to protect all of its citizens. I am fully supportive of tough and consistently administered impaired driving laws. However, I also believe in fair process and democratic institutions. As Alberta’s provincial government proceeds to imple-

ment similar legislation notwithstanding the B.C. Court decision, the debate now goes beyond civil libertarians versus those who are more inclined to trust the state. The concern is really that in the name of public safety, innocent people who did not drink and drive might face potentially life-ruining consequences.

On top of that threat, there are some who argue that the long-term impacts on public safety are not at all what is being advertised, either. Yesterday I spoke with Randy Munro, a retired RCMP veteran who spent 34 years policing. His concern is that the new law incents police to focus on the administrative penalties which are easier to process and do not require court time, rather than pursuing criminal code charges for those who are at or over the 0.08% blood alcohol limit. “I have lawyer friends who work both sides who advise their D.U.I. workload has gone way down,” Munro told me. The B.C. Crime Statistics page is not current enough to check the numbers on this anecdotal claim, but there are significant questions that need to be answered.

It is easy to take the pious-sounding approach and support tough laws on drinking and driving. I am not expert enough to offer a qualified opinion as to whether the legal line should be 0.05%

or 0.08%. What I do know is that if it is to be changed, it should be done in an appropriate democratic manner, balancing the rights of citizens and the presumption of innocence. Finding ways to sidestep the rights of citizens and placing all of our trust in police officers and roadside testing machines (which caused at least 2,300 mistaken tests in B.C. during the first year) is hardly democratic balance. There is also the concern that the focus on “money grab” administrative prohibitions (no criminal record, no court sanctions but increased fine revenue) may not be the recipe for improved safety in the longer run.

It is curious that at a time when the rights of occupiers to protest and the rights of Parliamentarians to debate issues without prorogation are made out to be barometers of the health (or lack thereof) of our democratic institutions, the simultaneous transfer of my individual rights from the judicial branch (where I have the right to stand before a judge and defend myself against charges) to the legislative branch (where the legislature empowers the police to impose sweeping penalties on me without a meaningful chance to defend myself) scarcely raises a whimper. When it comes to democratic process, this law is blowing at least a “warning”, if not a “fail.”

Another Evangelical Conspiracy, The Office of Religious Freedom

—Robert Joustra—

The CBC seems to be alleging there is yet another evangelical conspiracy afoot, since Prime Minister Harper’s government continues to disappoint conspiracy enthusiasts who expect theocracy to break any moment. This time, the conspiracy is hiding in plain sight: the forthcoming Canadian Office of Religious Freedom.

And of course there are plenty of reasons to be bitter at the government. Despite holding broad consultations (on the true breadth of which we have only their words of assurance), very little on this Office has been promoted or even talked about. There is, naturally, the indignation of religious communities and non-governmental associations that were not invited in these first rounds, upset partly because of the important appearance of inclusivity but mostly because they didn’t get invited to the parties. This especially shouldn’t surprise anyone at Amnesty International, given its recent and public exchanges with Minister Jason Kenney. Their invitation probably didn’t get lost in the mail.

The invitation list is spawning indignation from those who, as yet, have not been invited. Take one invitee, Thomas Farr: Farr is one of the world’s best regarded diplomats and clearly a VIP in any discussion on religious freedom. In the CBC’s report he is outed for his Catholicism, a fact that is plainly available to anyone with the power of Google.

But it’s not just Farr’s Catholicism which invalidates him. He is also American. And there are few things, the CBC wants us to think, that are more unnerving than learning about religion and its

freedoms from Americans.

The American Office of Religious Freedom, for which Farr once worked, was established in 1998 under President Clinton, and has a much longer history of supporting religious freedom broadly understood than the dismissive and critical assessment the CBC renders: “promoting Christianity overseas.” To make this criticism, apart from interviews with Farr, Robert Seiple or others who worked in the establishment of that Office, is sloppy journalism and plainly wrong. This Office continues to enjoy bi-partisan support in America in a time when almost nothing does.

To accuse Minister Baird of organizing the Canadian Office as a conditioning agent for Evangelical proselytism, based on almost no evidence of the constitution of that Office except the list of speakers at a single consultation, is apocryphal fear mongering.

To argue that America has no tradition of multiculturalism is another debate, but to suggest by doing so that it is therefore incapable of a serious practice of religious freedom is bizarre. America, unlike Canada, has a constitutionally enshrined separation of church and state and has long been an international advocate of religious freedom. In fact, despite the freedom of religion being included in numerous conventions and declarations of the United Nations, only the United States, Norway, the United Kingdom and Germany have something even resembling what Canada is proposing. To not even invite an American perspective to a consultation on such an Office would be ignorant and rude.

Finally, pause and ask why there are so many Christians, or why Minister Baird is going to lengths to meet with so many Muslims. Theocratic conspiracy theories, from McGill Professor Arvind Sharma—the sole CBC interviewee despite no discernible connection to the politics of the Office—may prove cathartic for CBC readers, but the Office of Religious Freedom in the United States tends towards interventions in the cases of Christians and Muslims because Christians and Muslims make up more than half the world’s population, and American foreign policy tends to be more active in regions where this is even more so the case.

So when Thomas Farr writes, as the CBC reports, that Islamic extremism is more of a threat to American security than Serbian Christian-nationalism he is referring to actual incidents of violence against Americans. It is not a moral equivocation or religiously intolerant to say this. It is true. Serbian Christian nationalism, awful as it is, does not have as one of its stated goals the death of America. You can imagine why America might take more interest in one over the other.

Reports like those of the CBC may be partly the fault of an unnecessarily closed-door government climate, but they are most certainly the fault of speculative and damaging journalism. Canada was, and remains indebted to the expertise of people like Thomas Farr, and to ignorantly drag his—and others’—religious convictions and expertise through the mud on such a shady basis is misleading and wrong.

White Bread Liberalism is Stale

—Brian Dijkema—

Things like this give liberalism a bad name.

The city of Gatineau—best known for hosting Canada’s Museum of Civilization and a host of public servants—has recently released a “values guide” for new immigrants. The guide is a veritable smorgasbord of helpful advice for new immigrants to ensure that they assimilate—sorry, transition—into Canadian society.

The document covers all kinds of ground, some of it helpful, some of it quite confusing. The helpful bits include suggestions to avoid such horrors as sexual abuse, beating your children, or killing in the name of honour. The strange bits include such suggestions as avoiding strong smelling food, washing your hands, and showing up on time for meetings.

On the one hand it’s hard to dismiss outright the idea of such a document. I would like to know the various traditions and practices of the city I’m moving to too. It’s hospitable.

But on the other hand the document is an indicator that liberalism—at least as it’s conceived in Quebec—is increasingly failing as a philosophical framework for social life.

The *Star*’s Haroon Siddiqui hits the nail on the head when he notes that there was a time when Canadians—or anyone for that matter—didn’t need political authorities to tell them what is polite. With tongue planted firmly in cheek he says:

These common courtesies were once widely observed, but no lon-

ger. We need a new social consensus. Who better to forge it than city halls? They have time, since they have little money and even less inclination to do what they are supposed to do—fix potholes and provide other services.

The document also suggests that religion is a private matter. Could it be that white bread liberalism—which eschews garlic, curry, and religion—is the reason why Gatineau felt compelled to put this document out in the first place?

The problem with the document is that it attempts to turn the public square into a sterile, bleached white space, devoid of such “irritants” as the smell of curry, body odour, religion, and culture. It attempts to remove from the public square all of the things which make us human. The public square is made squeaky clean, but why would anyone want to go there?

Gatineau’s vision of the public square discourages anyone human from entering it. The alternative is to stay at home, and stay with your people. The result is the loss of the public, and increased frustration among those who feel arbitrarily cut off from the greater community. In the hopes of creating an antiseptic public square, documents like these create a septic society.

So, what to do? Siddiqui suggests that “newcomers to Gatineau should treat the gratuitous guide as any other pamphlet. Heed what appeals to you, reject the rest.” I agree and would give one more piece of advice: add another clove of garlic to your curry.