

Religion, and the CRTC's Paternalistic Leftover

—Ray Pennings—

Among the annoying foibles of our era is the tendency to forget the lessons of history. Even more annoying, however, is misusing them.

Last week, the CRTC denied a request from Crossroads Television Systems (CTS) to amend its licence. Currently, Crossroads must provide at least 20 hours a week of “balanced programming” between 6 p.m. and 11 p.m. CTS sought relief from that provision on economic grounds. It asked that its quota of “balance” be measured over the entire broadcast schedule rather than simply by prime time hours. The Commission cited its established Religious Broadcasting Policy as its supporting rationale.

A dissenting opinion by Commissioner Peter Menzies highlights how narrowly and negatively the authors of that policy interpreted the root causes of intolerance: “They appear to have . . . completely overlooked the positive role that faith organizations play in society.”

Menzies’ dissent insightfully points out how inconsistent our handling of contentious religious questions is with our approach to other social issues. He notes that anyone in a bar where Mixed Martial Arts are being screened can witness MMA’s effect on young male testosterone levels. “Yet,” he writes, “the Commission—rightly—does not insist that sports broadcasters balance this impact by broadcasting ballet or interpretive dance as an antidote.”

This is establishment discomfort with religion, and it is at odds with modern times. For years the prevailing assumption was that if we just ignored and privatized religion, it would go away. Empirical evidence confirms that theory was misguided. To suggest, as does the CRTC decision, that public discussion of religion is so sensitive that it requires carefully crafted guidelines (which CTS contends are economically unfeasible) is the paternalistic leftover of an outdated secular orthodoxy.

American literary critic E.J. Hirsh Jr. has written that historical study “helps revive the powerful alternative ideas that flourished before the dominant dispensation quashed them.” The CRTC decision appeals to the status quo of the past few decades which, when considered in a broader context, is clearly ahistorical. While the decline in religious participation from the 1950s to 2000 was steady, the past decade has seen a modest increase in those who say they attend religious services weekly, especially among younger people. And while the period of secularization has affected the identity and ethos of a good many institutions we no longer think of as religious, it requires amnesia of unthinkable proportions to pretend that religious considerations did not play a significant role in the development of most of our “name” institutions. The list of faith-inspired projects is a long one and includes schools and universities, hospitals, social services, care for widows and prisoners, response to natural disasters and emergencies, promotion of the arts as well as promotion of the virtue of business and hard work.

Granted, plenty of intolerance has occurred in the name of religion—as it has in the name of irreligion. For almost fifty years, the CRTC denied any licenses to religious broadcasters to spare the airwaves of speech in which one group was unduly critical of another. When a few decades ago the current policy was put in place, “balance” became the preferred solution with every station required to provide a variety of perspectives.

The particularities of broadcast licences and the technicalities of CRTC policy are not the stuff of everyday conversation, nor should they be. However, it’s time to call foul when religious free speech is accompanied by a regulatory and economic handicap that doesn’t apply to any other speech. Such dismissiveness reflects a narrow-minded view of religion that belongs to yesterday, not to contemporary Canadian attitudes. It is a public approach toward religion that we would not tolerate in any other aspect of life.

It is time for the CRTC to stop treating religious programming with a paternalism whose vogue is so out of date.

Straying from our Triangle

—Peter Stockland—

I blogged here recently about the way small magazines are challenging the pusillanimous acquiescence of mainstream media before the Internet onslaught.

My post should have acknowledged that some of the big boys of print aren’t going down without a fight, either.

A prime example of that fighting spirit is the entry into the North American print market of a magazine called *Intelligent Life*, a sumptuous, oversized style, culture, and travel magazine published by, of all outfits, *The Economist*.

When I say oversized I mean 9×11 format, 156-page colour saturated magazine bling. When I say *sumptuous*, I mean a book that begins with a spread opener Rolex advertisement and finishes with a back cover for Patek Philippe. And when I say *style, culture, and travel*, I mean the entire universe of subject matter that can be shoehorned into those very wide headings.

The January/February issue that I picked up at an airport newsstand to read on a cross-country flight this week has a table of contents that covers everything from Julian Barnes visiting the house of Jean Sibelius in Finland to finding poetry on the iPad to the architecture of Thomas Heatherwick to a survey of literary festivals in India and advice on how to keep fit at age 82.

The magazine has been available outside North America since 2008 but until this past October was only available in the U.S. and Canada on iPad or by subscription. Starting in October, the *Economist* began market sampling by inserting 32-page supplements of *Intelligent Life* in its regular magazine.

As *IL* editor Tim de Lisle writes in his editor’s letter, reaction to the sampling began with some readers feeling “sullied” and angry at its “culturally biased garbage,” but has since improved substantially.

“Early responses were mainly hostile, later ones much more positive,” de Lisle says.

That is itself positive, whether or not we care to read about fishing in Dalmatia or the enduring fashion mystery of Big Hair.

Clearly what *The Economist* is doing is throwing a very large, rich rock into the pond of North American print publications. It is betting that print, cries and whispers to the contrary, remains sustainable, indeed profitable. If *Intelligent Life* sinks like a stone, it won’t matter whether that it was a good or bad magazine. It will signal only that *The Economist*, of all outfits, made a bad bet.

To switch the metaphor, a friend who is one of the most savvy print publishers I’ve ever known, recently told me with great confidence that the medium will get a “dead cat bounce” as people rebel against the deficiencies of e-reading.

“Print will get a bounce,” he said. “The problem is, it will also be a dead cat,” he said.

I genuinely hope that proves untrue and not out of sheer nostalgia for ink and paper. As writer Ian Leslie argues in an *Intelligent*



Intelligent Life, January/February 2012

Life column, the loss of print is as much about the diminishment of serendipity as it about pining for tactility.

Leslie points out that we mistakenly have come to think of serendipity as any happy coincidence. In fact, it means having the wisdom to recognize the discovery of something we weren’t even looking for.

Its very organizing principles, Leslie says, make the internet efficient at the expense of offering up encounters we could not imagine were even possible.

He compares the effect to what happened to cities in the 19th century when the attempt to organize the metropolis for efficiency decimated the opportunity for discovery around every corner.

By mid-20th century, sociology had determined that even in a city such as Paris most people moved, and most lives were lived, in pretty rigid “triangles” bounding home, work or school, and a few outside interests. Most of us, Leslie points out, have come to use the internet as 1950s Parisians came to use the City of Light.

“We have our paths, our bookmarks and our feeds, and we stick closely to them. We no longer ‘surf’ the information superhighway as it has become too vast to cruise without a map. And as it has evolved, it has become better and better at ensuring we never stray from our virtual triangles.”

Print, by its nature, is less like the urban triangle and more akin to what the sages of Sesame Street used to call “a wreck and a tangle” of expansive boulevards, inviting avenues and, yes, sometimes confusing cul de sacs that “wander like a tedious argument” in T.S. Eliot’s immortal phrase.

I will leave it to readers’ tastes to determine which of those categories the content of *Intelligent Life* most resembles. But as a publisher of a small magazine, newly launched (i.e. *Convivium*) I can only shout huzzah that some big boys of publishing are at least fighting back to save print from perdition.

Personal, Not Private

—Ray Pennings—

A few weeks back President Obama announced, and a few days later backtracked on, a policy requiring employers to pay for sterilization services and contraception (including the ‘morning-after’ pill considered by many pro-lifers to be a form of abortion) as part of the minimum provisions of health care services. It isn’t clear whether this was a calculated political move designed to motivate particular constituencies, or a naïve administrative blunder in the implementation of “Obama-care,” but the media sandstorm and quick reversal indicates that it didn’t work out quite as planned. With the hyper-partisanship engendered by “life issues,” and headlines suggesting the President is waging a “war on religion,” it is easy to understand why the President’s political advisors counselled a retreat.

What was overlooked in much of the coverage, however, was what the policy demonstrated about our understanding (or lack thereof) of the connection between religion and the public good—and how that connection is often expressed through institutions.

The Economist, hardly a newspaper one ex-

pects to be leading the charge on these issues, astutely commented:

America is lucky to possess alongside its public institutions a rich ecosystem of hospitals, universities and schools that are largely secular in function and serve all faiths, but are animated by a religious vocation. Why punish them? It cannot be beyond the wit of man to give their employees access to contraception without making the employers trample deeply held beliefs by paying directly.

Contemporary public discourse in North America mistakenly marginalizes religion. Our most basic error is considering religion as something that is private in nature. Without diving into technical and philosophic debate about different conceptions of religion, surely we can, in our public discourse, get past the notion that private beliefs lack public consequences? Our most deeply held beliefs shape our priorities, and our view of our neighbours and our responsibilities toward them.

This is often expressed not only in the behaviours of individuals but also of groups. Most obvious are the desires of explicitly religious groups to live out their faith, whether that be through the service of God and neigh-

Condemnations, Contradictions, and Rich Ironies

—Brian Dijkema—

The talk about last month’s move of the Electro-Motive Diesel plant from London (Ontario) to the United States reveals much about the way we treat economics in Ontario and in Canada.

Some see the plant’s closure as just another example of blood-sucking foreign companies who come into Canada, ignore our unions, buy our plants, and leave the workers, the provinces, and the country to clean up the mess. Ken Lewenza, the head of the union representing the workers at the EMD plant, suggests that the closure “open[s] a door for multinational corporations to feel confident they can do whatever they want, to destroy communities and the lives of people and get away with it.”

Okay, but others suggest that EMD simply did what any company would—and should do—go where they can make the most money. Mike Moffat, a voice of reason and sanity in a discussion sorely lacking both, suggests that, for Canadian manufacturing, this is the new reality.

A commodities boom has driven the Canadian dollar from a 62¢ U.S. low up to parity, vaporizing any labour cost advantage we previously enjoyed over the U.S. and changing the structure of the economy; at the margin, a Canadian worker adds far more to our economy by extracting resources than by building cars.

Moving the plant to the U.S. simply made bottom-line sense, especially once Mitch Daniels, the Republican governor of Indiana, passed right-to-work legislation and offered a \$30 million dollar incentive to EMD to move its plant there.

So what does this discourse reveal about our perspective on economics? What’s gone missing in the discussion are two points.

First, the *solution* offered by Ken Lewenza to the decline of manufacturing in Ontario—a solution shared by many in the labour movement—is precisely what leads to the *decline* of manufacturing in Ontario: government intervention. Lewenza says, “If the government does not intervene, it sends a strong message to every multinational they can treat . . . workers in the same way.” Yet the very intervention they want in Canada—increased incentives for manufacturers, employment guarantees, and other protectionist measures—is exactly what took place in the U.S. and is at least partially responsible for the closure of EMD London. In a richly ironic way, Mitch Daniels used public money to bribe a plant into moving to his state, and used legislation to prevent trade unions from exercising the powers they have in Canada. One wants to ask Ken Lewenza: Why is that type of political involvement in the market okay in Ontario, and yet so wrong in Indiana?

Which leads to the second item which could use further discussion. Why is it okay for states to do this at all? If there is an inherent logical problem in the union’s critique of EMD’s action, there are surely legitimate questions to ask of Indiana, especially insofar as it is governed by a free market-loving Republican like Mitch Daniels? It would appear that contradicting oneself through policy is not the sole domain of the left.

Yes, Canadian manufacturing is changing. But sadly, and perhaps more problematically, so is the relationship between governments and corporations. The increasing influence of corporate dollars on state revenues, and perhaps especially vice versa, is a genuine problem, one that does not bode well for the flourishing of trade, labour policies, and public governance critical to thriving communities.

bour through helping those in need, creating works of beauty and art, or spreading the word to people who have not yet heard the good news. That institutions like hospitals and universities often are formed out of religious motivation is no surprise. It is only a secular amnesia of unthinkable proportions that would ignore the history which shows it has long been so.

The miscalculations of Obama and his team are but a small manifestation of an assumption we would all do well to leave behind. Religion may be personal but it isn’t private. In fact, it is a public good that makes our society livable and humane, and a resource that is neglected at our peril.