

A Little Thin, Isn't It?

—Brian Dijkema—

The United Church of Canada's recent report on Israeli and Palestinian policy made front-page news this week. But Shimon Fogel's reaction in Tuesday's *National Post* gets it wrong, when he suggests the report hurts the United Church's reputation.

I've read the report, and its content is not what makes it noteworthy. I'm reasonably certain that you could find a bunch of similar-calibre papers from C-range students in first year political science courses in universities across the country. No, what makes it noteworthy, and the reason it made front page news, is that it was produced by something *described* as a Christian church.

It's difficult to find any marks which are specifically Christian in the report. It claims to offer a biblical and theological vision for its findings, but these are difficult to find. The closest thing one can find is this:

While much of this history has been clouded by violence and oppression, empires and occupation, exile and return, this land has also been shaped by an awareness of the sacred and transcendent. Whether it is the night journey of Muhammad, the vision of Solomon, or the prayer of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, here heaven and earth have come close to each other. The integrity of the three world faiths represented by the land of Israel/Palestine is at stake in how this conflict is resolved.

That's a little thin, isn't it? In fact, the four paragraphs dedicated to "biblical and theological vision" are among the most weakly written and banal bits of the whole report. The report as a whole reads like more like policy proposals from a political party or think-tank than the work of a church. The effect is similar to that of Christian rock and roll. Take the music, hairdo, leather jackets, and electric guitars of an eighties rock-band, replace "girl" with Jesus, and you've got church music. The result in policy is as confounding as Stryper. It leaves me wanting to say, "You're not making Christianity better; you're making public policy worse." It has media cachet only because it's connected with Canada's (supposedly) second largest church.

No, this report doesn't hurt the reputation of the United Church. After their wholly serious exploration of "Post-Theistic" Christianity and other such (non)theological adventures, the United Church does not have much of a reputation left. It's the reputation of broader Canadian Christianity that takes the blow, by the United Church's lingering association.

What of those who want the apostolic faith to be taken seriously for public life? The minimalist and weak way this report treats scripture and Christian tradition to speak to an important issue, combined with the highly disputable policy proposals it unabashedly advances, communicate to a Canadian public that scripture and biblical tradition aren't important to public dialogue. The church, in this instance, becomes just another voice in the cacophony of think-tanks, university professors, politicians, and lobbyists.

Perhaps it's time for the United Church to stop speaking as a Christian church, and for the *National Post* to stop covering them as one. Might it not be more helpful to the public to describe them as a collective of independent spiritual beings with political opinions? Sounds less newsworthy, doesn't it? Perhaps we'd all be better off.

Watch Out for those Charitable Types!

—Ray Pennings—

While preparing my income tax forms last week, a warning popped onto the screen.

AUDIT RISK WARNING: Charitable donations exceeding 5% of your income. In our experience, this is a red flag that may put your return at increased risk of scrutiny by CRA...We suggest you use the navigation tabs at the top of the screen to return to the appropriate section of the TurboTax interview to review this information and make changes as appropriate.

Sadly, I wasn't surprised. Correspondence with the CRA auditors has become routine in recent years and now the TurboTax software was telling me exactly why. Being audited isn't even the worst thing. Just copy the receipts, fill out some additional paperwork, let Canada Post do their thing, and as long as everyone is administratively accurate, you might get your tax refund before fall.

Still, reading the formula put so starkly made me angry inside. Statistics suggest that anyone who comes close to tithing from their income (and claiming the benefits on their income tax form, which I assume most do) are among the six percent of Canadians who are part of the civic core, "super givers" as a recent polling report described them. Such behaviour, it would seem, makes you part of a suspect group, someone the CRA needs to keep a special eye on.

There are those, like Thomas Walkom who opined in the *Toronto Star* on Saturday, who suggest that the time has come to eliminate all charitable receipts. Distinguishing between real and bogus charities, he suggests, has become next to impossible. He finds it problematic to see tax subsidies going to charities whose views he doesn't endorse and so he would rather have government provide grants to organizations like the United Way and turn all charities into wards of the state. (I'm not sure how he justifies the state providing political subsidies to parties other than those he agrees with, but I digress.)

A blog doesn't provide the space to counter this proposal, which clearly presumes a far greater confidence in the efficiency, fairness, and ability of government than I have. If Walkom would like to argue that \$2.2 billion of tax expenditures in charitable receipts to the federal coffers would be better spent by the bureaucracy, let's have that debate. In fact, the Parliamentary Budget Officer, comparing the efficacy of tax credits over govern-

ment spending programs, suggested that tax credits are usually less costly, less prescriptive providing greater choice, and at least as efficient to administer.

But it's not just about money or efficiency. It is about encouraging individuals to care for others. It's about working together with your fellow citizens in organizations and causes that help others. It is about thinking beyond ourselves. Charitable receiving privileges in Canada are available to organizations that seek to advance religion, promote education, and alleviate poverty. The cold fact is that 29% of the population provides more than 80% of the \$10 billion plus of this sort of work that takes place in Canada. (Measuring charity only by dollars is, of course, problematic as the volunteer hours which provide the backbone of the sector aren't incorporated.) Of those 29%, 23% attend a place of worship regularly. Ignore all of the good works and benevolence that takes place in the name of religion (and how impoverished our society would be without that), and people of faith still support "secular charity" by a considerable margin over those who don't participate in religious communities.

One counterargument may be that there are those who do abuse the charitable tax line, although it tries incredulity to believe that a simple test of giving 5% or more of income to charity is an adequate screen to catch these miscreants. The only explanation that seems to cohere is that giving to your neighbour, unless you are forced to do so by the government, is abnormal behaviour. And we pay the good folks at the CRA to keep an eye on us abnormal sorts.

Charitable lines on tax returns don't come close to telling the whole story, but neither does a canary flying from the mine-shaft. Clearly though, I'm being sent a warning by both the computer formula and by Mr. Walkom's column last Saturday: public expression of beliefs, as well as behaviours that may deviate from the norm, are the focus of public and systematic worry. Bad people, those charitable donor types are. Better keep an eye on them.



Wiebo's War

—Robert Joustra—

At the end of *After Virtue*, after a long argument about the cultural state of modern society, Alisdair MacIntyre says we are waiting for a new—albeit very different—kind of St. Benedict. Modernity and its institutions have ushered in a new dark age from which retreat and retrenchment may yet be our only salvation.

Wiebo Ludwig, a Christian Reformed minister from Ontario, may not have shared MacIntyre's nascent Aristotelian-Thomism, but he more than shared his feelings of unease. Unlike MacIntyre, more in fact like Wendell Berry, Wiebo retreated with his family and others to the remote tundra of northern Alberta. There they forestalled the powers of a modern age, clinging to their blue Psalters, and to a more rural, agrarian way of life. "Our true religion" writes Wendell Berry, "is a sort of autistic industrialism." Wiebo's work was the recovery of another, true religion.

All did not go well. With Wiebo Ludwig's passing of esophageal cancer last month, at the age of 70, op-eds and even a documentary, "Wiebo's War," covered the clash between Wiebo Ludwig and modern society. What, the unfamiliar might ask, would modern society care for a group of the religiously fervent carving out a farm in northern Alberta? Of course it wouldn't care a whit... unless there was oil and gas under that farm.

And so Wiebo Ludwig, unlike the beloved, pastoral poet Wendell Berry, became embroiled in scandals ranging from sabotage to pipeline bombings to murder. None of it was ever proven. But the twinkle in Wiebo's eye, his cagey media presence, and the circumstantial evidence encasing his life underlined obstructions of justice, facts undisclosed, people protected.

Paul Joosse, writing his dissertation on radical environmentalism, began visiting Wiebo Ludwig at Trickle Creek after a string of bombings in 2008 and 2009. *Macleans* interviewed him on the life and death of Wiebo. Radical environmentalism hardly seems to tell Wiebo's story: he did not, after all, go searching for a fight with oil and gas. It came to him. And his Reformed theology inspired not only a more radical perspective on the environment, on stewardship and respect (à la Wendell Berry), but a more fundamental shift away from a consumption-oriented culture, one which had broken covenant with its God and with itself. Theirs was a true Benedictine confession, a retreat from a dark age into a place of hope, of peace, and of new covenant.

It is a sad thing, a tragic thing, that Wiebo's legacy is radical, violent environmentalism, and that circumstances drove that community to unproven excesses. Charges of fundamentalism and cultish behaviour abound, though Joosse claims to find little evidence to sustain these. Indeed, it is *lack of evidence* which is its own kind of evidence in all things surrounding Wiebo Ludwig.

Macleans, Paul Joosse, and others miss the point when they talk about a comingling of traditional Christianity and radical environmentalism. It is not merely an environmental message, but an interpretation of covenant and of religion which finds itself at fundamental odds with the social contract of North American life. That is not just about oil and gas. And that is a far more profound prophecy, underlining a far more worrying cultural anomie, than one radical environmentalist passing quietly in the solitude of northern Alberta.

trials, I will argue until my dying breath, as a man of extraordinary character and courage. He did not shirk the fight for his innocence nor evade the punishment when the levathan State grotesquely and abominably overwhelmed his capacity to fend off its wrongs.

Now he has endured. Now he is coming home. Justice and charity demand he be given a warm welcome by Canada as his feet return to Canadian soil.

If I could play the trumpet, I would be outside the airport sounding it the moment he arrives.

Conrad Black Deserves Trumpets

—Peter Stockland—

Doubtless Conrad Black would prefer to forego the brass band and welcoming speeches on the tarmac when he comes back to Canada, a free man, in a few days.

It's a pity. He deserves them. And more. Much, much more.

What he does not deserve is niggardly nagging from the NDP about his return being an example of the Harper government giving special treatment for a friend. Indeed, NDP leader Thomas Mulcair's denunciation of Black as a "British criminal" was a perfect example of the mean-mouthed spitefulness that opponents in the party's recent leadership race warned is too deeply embedded in his character.

Yes, Conrad Black was forced by former Prime Minister Jean Chretien's virulent act of vindictiveness to relinquish his Canadian citizenship more than a decade ago. Yes, he was obliged to become a British citizen in order to accept the honour of being named to the House of Lords. But he is a born and bred Canadian and has done more to improve this country in his business dealings than Mr. Mulcair ever will in a lifetime of sophomoric class warfare sound bytes.

It is a churlish, and apparently hard-wired, reflex of the left to denounce as unjust the justifiable treatment of its opponents simply because they are opponents. The tactic invariably involves digging up a claimed injustice visited upon someone among the left's putative friends in order to create the effect of a double injustice.

In this case, Mr. Mulcair caught breath from slugging Conrad Black long enough

to point to the case of a convicted criminal named Gary Freeman who has been denied re-entry to Canada despite having a wife and four children here.

Mr. Freeman, according to published reports, is an American by birth who also had links to the Black Panthers. He entered Canada on the lam from a criminal act committed in 1969. The criminal act was shooting a policeman. He lived illegally in this country until 2008, when he was extradited and served 30 days for his 39-year-old crime.

Yet the point should not be to compare the severity of his act, or the paucity of his imprisonment with the obliteration of Mr. Black's business empire, personal life, and freedom essentially for the convicted offense of removing some cardboard boxes from his Toronto office while under investigation by American authorities.

It is true that Mr. Freeman, through his guile, remained a free man for almost his entire adult life despite having committed a very serious crime.

But if it is unjust to bar him from rejoining his family after he has paid his State-imposed debt, then it is unjust on its own ground. It certainly seems almost self-evident to me that even a man who committed a senseless violent act at the age of 20, who has owned up and taken his (albeit much-reduced) lumps, should not be prevented from reuniting with his family at age 63.

Let that be settled as it should, not by dragging Conrad Black unwittingly into the fray.

Mr. Black spent four years in the snares of the U.S. prison system. He has been subjected to almost an entire decade of torment by the American legal system. He came through his