The Cardus Daily

The Official Cardus Blog

Volume 1 Issue 23 | May 21-25, 2012 | www.cardus.ca/blog

Cultivating Civic Virtue

—Brian Dijkema—

When North Americans aren't bowling alone, we're drinking, reading, and laughing together with people who are like us. The media with which we engage, our friends, our neighbourhoods, and, increasingly (sadly) even our churches are filled with people like us. We might differ from these people on minor points, but, in general, we stick with what we know and, perhaps more importantly, what makes us feel good.

Political parties, as always, have noticed this, and exploit these tendencies by routine use of a wedge to carve these various self-selecting groups into potentially winnable constituencies. As a result, while the conversations in our living rooms and across our fences are amiable and comfortable, our politics exude a special type of nastiness; extreme politics, if you will.

What can be done? Democracy relies on civil, principled debate, and perhaps more importantly, the willingness to have your mind changed by your opponent's logic, emotional pleas, or the ethos exemplified by her community. Persuasion is integral to a healthy democracy, and persuasion can only take place when you routinely interact with people different than yourself.

But, as sociologists continue to tell us, and as outfits like Sun TV and Rabble.ca proliferate, we are increasingly unlikely to interact or listen in any substantial way with and to those with whom we have fundamental differences.

Is Canadian democracy doomed?

Some, like Gregory Wolfe, think that beauty will save the world. I think he's on to something, but I wonder if even this might be a bit too much for us to bear. Beauty, after all, can be frightening in its scope. Perhaps we might start a bit smaller and

Photo from hillstreetgarden.org

operate according to the mustard seed principle of politics.

The mustard seed principle—a hypothesis as yet unencumbered by evidence—is that those institutions which mean the least to political parties matter the most to the overall health of a functioning constitutional democracy. In Canada at least, with the space increasing between those who hold to orthodox Christian beliefs and the concerns of political parties, the church might be the best example of such an institution.

The community garden might be another. Most big cities have them these days, and it is interesting to note the strange mixture of people that are drawn to growing their own food in little plots. On a given evening at the garden I'm a part of, you can see wealthy, poor, black, white, men and women, lefties and libertarians, and everyone else in between. And, in the midst of sharing space, watering cans, and advice on how to deal with beet leaf miners, one gets the sense that what is happening is both unique and healthy. The tropes that political parties would have us believe about our neighbours—that the rich don't care about the poor, for instance, or that the poor are lazy—seem slightly less plausible when you see a wealthy gardener help out a struggling neighbour with watering, or when you see the care invested in tender lettuces by the neighbourhood welfare recipient. Gardens might not save the world. They might not even save Canadian democracy. But the green shoots of civic virtue needed for healthy politics are cultivated there, and that's a start.

Plus ca Change

—Peter Stockland—

On today's 100th day of protests by Quebec students, *Journal de Montreal* columnist Richard Martineau offers a scabrous depiction of his province.

Citing former Laval University professor and labour relations specialist Rejean Breton, Martineau renders Quebecers as infantile, self-obsessed fantasists suckling upon the Nanny State.

"The two (sides) of Quebec are corruption and revolution," he quotes Breton. "On one side, we have those who exchange brown envelopes. On the other, we have those who dream of revolution. These are the principal characteristics of a banana republic."

Martineau himself uses equally harsh vocabulary. He notes students will be massing to again disrupt Montreal's city centre this afternoon just as the Charbonneau commission begins hearings on construction industry corruption.

"Today, Quebec will tear off its shirt and expose with pride its two ideological teats," Martineau writes. "On one side, a clique of politicians, Mafioso and business people plotting to butter their bread on both sides at the expense of taxpayers. On the other, a clique of trade unionists who are using anarchists and anti-capitalists to destabilize the government in order to protect their own privileges."

It is, he writes, a depressing dichotomy in which ordinary Quebecers are caught between gangsters who rob them of their tax dollars, and powerful unions that block all efforts at reform.

"Corruption, revolution, alienation. Desolation," he concludes.

Intriguingly, also transformation. For in Quebec's 2005 student strike, Martineau was a staunch supporter of those who marched against cuts to the budgets of post-secondary institutions. He used his high profile as columnist and TV commentator to argue against the cuts and also urge the strikers into the fray.

In 2012, he has been, from the outset, a vocal critic of the students for their churlishness in refusing to pay modestly higher annual tuition fees and for their violent, bully boy tactics. He has paid a price. His home was picketed. Students carried placards representing him as a pig. His family was publicly denigrated.

On a recent edition of the hugely popular Sunday night TV show *Tout le monde en parle*, he was chided by host Guy A. Lepage for his apparent inconsistency.

"The situation is very different in 2012 compared to 2005," Martineau argued.

"But you are still the same Richard Martineau," Lepage retorted.

The shot left the man of words effectively speechless, which may itself represent a damning picture of what plagues contemporary Quebec.

The street spasms of the students (mere pawns of the progressive reactionaries), and the stench of corruption that will be aired at the Charbonneau hearings, are only symptoms of the real heartsickness besetting this place.

The genuine illness in Quebec is fear: authentic, in-dwelling fear that altering anything in the present will inevitably obliterate the future. And as Edmund Burke famously noted in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*: "A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation. Without such means it might even risk the loss of that part of the constitution which it wished the most religiously to preserve."

The parasites may continue to feed. Half-educated *habituees* of post-secondary schools may continue to do their happy dances in public for another 100 or 1000 days. Until Quebecers face the need to transform their society, they will not recover it.

A Heterosexual Problem

—John Seel—

Marriage has a heterosexual problem.

When the termites have done their work on the foundations of the home, it doesn't take much to knock it down. Such is the case of traditional marriage. It does not face a homosexual crisis as much as a heterosexual one.

Don't place the blame on politics, Hollywood, or a beleaguered minority. The problem lies with the vast number of Christians who fill church pews week to week. Their views on the pattern and power for marriage are no different from the surrounding culture. Their reality of failure is also no different.

This is marriage season. Many, perhaps most, couples will be entering their marriages with expectations that are inconsistent to reality. It is only a matter of time when reality catches up to their relationship. Houses do not long stand when their foundations are gone. This much can be assured in marriage . . . in time the winds will come and the water will rise. Only those marriages with a firm foundation based on reality will survive.

This becomes abundantly clear when reading the first chapter of Tim and Kathy Keller's book, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (Dutton, 2011). Two things are true about society's attitudes toward marriage.

First is a growing skepticism over the validity of the institution of marriage. The Pew Research Center found in 2010 that nearly 40 percent of Americans believe that marriage is becoming obsolete. And many, particularly the young, are acting accordingly. There are few examples in popular culture *celebrating* the institution of marriage as a means of human flourishing. Rather it is the butt of jokes, just the remaining cultural challenger to the taken-for-granted idolatries of the age: individual freedom, autonomy, and self-fulfillment. For many, marriage is a problem, not a solution.

Second is an unrealistic expectation for marriage. This is the flip side of the skepticism. Here a romantic therapeutic consumerism dominates. The common search is for one's *soul mate* as the one who loves without question and meets every need. This is the premise behind ABC's dating game shows "The Bachelor" and "The Bachelorette." The assumption that placing a random grouping of men and women in exotic locations to pursue romance can lead to the basis for a meaningful relationship is about as far-fetched as a group of chimpanzees launching a NASA rocket. Everything about the show, for all its lust-filled emotional appeal, belies the stated goal to "find one's true love." And when the cameras are turned off and the contestants return to reality, the track record for success is overshadowed by the cloud of repeated heartache and failure. As an aside, this known fact has raised questions about the current Bachelorette Emily Maynard, a 26-year-old single mom, who is bringing her six-year-old daughter, Rikki, along with her. Consenting adults can be public fools, but when does this cross the line to become child abuse?

In any case, the consumer nature of finding a spouse via a game show seems justified—a romantic shopping spree the likes of which are only depicted in the glossy pages of a bridal magazine.

But in fact, this is not how marriage works . . . or is supposed to work. The Kellers counter, "[A] good marriage is more painfully hard to achieve than athletic or artistic prowess. Raw, natural talent does not enable you to play baseball as a pro or write great literature without enduring discipline and enormous work. Why would it be easy to live lovingly and well with another human being in light of what is profoundly wrong within our human nature?"

Here we come face-to-face with biblical realism. The Bible calls marriage a "mystery." Its secret is this: it only works when it is based on self-denial and self-sacrifice rather than self-fulfillment and self-achievement.

The Kellers ask, "Is the purpose of marriage to deny your interests for the good of the family, or is it rather to assert your interests for the fulfillment of yourself?" Marriage only works on the basis of "mutual fulfillment through mutual sacrifice." This is the only pattern of marriage that works. The pattern of the cross is the shape of a happy home. It's more than a religious issue, it is simply the way the world works and marriages endure.

This realism has been lost in the public's imagination. Self-denial and self-sacrifice are not the message of romantic comedies, reality game shows, or Oxygen sitcoms. But they are the message of the gospel, of which marriage is an embodied picture. It is time, especially for Christians, to rebuild our lives and relationships on this foundation.

Life Lessons in Cultural Engagement

—John Sikkema—

Think of a nature special you come across on TV featuring an endangered species of which you know nothing, and about which you care little—the Hellbender salamander, say. I learned of it recently in just this way. Zoologists spent years researching this exotic creature. Nature cinematographers camped out for days to capture footage. All were driven in their efforts by the simple desire to raise awareness of the species' existence, and so attract sympathy and support for its survival.

At least in Canada, this is how I sometimes feel about Christians in this post-Christian or, perhaps more truthfully, *pagan* society. Most are like salamanders, wanting to be left undiscovered and alone, as long as their quiet, secure space under a rock remains undisturbed. Few Christians are like the zoologists and cinematographers, at least making the effort to see that a survivable habitat is maintained for their salamander friends. And broader society? Just like in my dubious analogy, they don't much care. Worse, maybe they consider the salamander a rather unpleasant creature that had better remain under some forsaken rock, while the people who seem so interested in their preservation should find something better to do.

The point is that Christians, even those active in the "public square," seem to have settled for a mandate of *preservation* rather than *domination*. What happened to boldly declaring the dominion of Christ over every inch of the Dominion of Canada?

To focus particularly on where the Lord has placed me for this stage in my life—in law school, and here at Cardus—I do not argue for a return to Blackstone's *Commentaries* as primary reading for legal education or as a guiding influence in Anglo-Canadian law, as they used to be. But I do continually find myself and my faith on the defensive, inside the classroom and out.

Perhaps an example from one of my classes will explain. "How far should we go in tolerating institutions such as Trinity Western?" our constitutional law professor probed during a class discussion of *Trinity Western University v. B.C. College of Teachers*, a leading case on freedom of religion in Canada. In that case, the B.C. College of Teachers had refused to accredit TWU's teachers' college, for the avowed reason that their graduates could be reasonably expected to discriminate against homosexual students in schools since they were asked to sign a code of conduct that obliged them to abstain from a variety of things, including homosexual conduct. Yet, more discouraging than my professor's question were some of my classmates' responses. Tolerate? One girl pronounced curtly, "We shouldn't."

That professor's question epitomized, I believe, the general posture of legal academic elites towards religious individuals, groups, and institutions. They generally take an antagonistic stance towards religious claimants seeking to assert protection for a belief or practice that is deemed incompatible with "*Charter* values" (a rather nebulous term indeed). Sometimes they take a more accommodating (patronizing) stance, but only where religious protections entail mere inconvenience to society.

Yet both antagonism and patronage stem from an underlying mindset that sees religious freedom as a benefit benevolently bestowed upon backwards religious types by the secular state in the name of tolerance and, it seems, in the expectation (or hope) that "progress" will eventually erase the impact of religion in law and render religious groups impotent in future influence

In my relatively brief involvement with Cardus, I have come to greatly appreciate its commitment to confront and overcome the above mindset that so pervades secular institutions. But I've also learned that the motivation for doing so cannot be to ensure that Christians in Canada continue to have it relatively easy.

If religious freedom is only about us, we Christians frankly don't even deserve a rock to hide under. A mandate of preservation accomplishes little for the kingdom of God and for his glory.

Our motivation must stem from a proper understanding of the cultural mandate God has given to us, and our courage must come from our trust in the truth and power of his word. But being motivated and courageous isn't enough. This is where the work of organizations like Cardus is invaluable: equipping Christians with adequate intellectual tools and resources is a necessary step in growing Christians as effective engagers of the cultures in which God has placed us.Sad and serious, yes. But let's not blame technology for it all. The shriveling, the shrinking, the melting away is the fault of an industry that has stumbled into a pit of its own making.

Michael Van Pelt, President | Ray Pennings, Publisher | Dan Postma, Editor | Kathryn de Ruijter, Design