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## OPINIONS

## How We Think of Religious Freedom

—Brian Dijkema—

Well, it didn't take long for articles about religion in the public square to make their way back into the news cycle. In the span of a week—in what must be the most bang for the buck ever seen by a government office with no staff, no structure, no plan, and a paltry budget of five million—three articles on the yet-to-be-formed office of Religious Freedom popped up in the *Globe & Mail*. Each article provides a glimpse of not only *what* Canadians think about religious freedom, but *how* Canadians think about religious freedom.

The irascible Gerald Caplan's article begins well. There is "much work for Canada to do" with regard to championing religious freedom. Caplan highlights a short list of religious persecutions, violence, and ignorance around the world, taking particular delight in a fight between monks wielding brooms in the church of the Nativity.

The problem, however, is that the article drips with so much sarcasm and thinly-concealed disdain for religion that we don't really know what to make of his position on the office, though we find out exactly what he thinks of religion. In discussing a particularly nasty case of orthodox Jews in Israel, Caplan says, "They are also thought to be among those looking hopefully to Canada's nascent office of Religious Freedom to vigorously defend their right to spit freely on little girls." Readers get the sense that Caplan would much rather religion be ignored than protected. The article's contemptuous tone sets the bar high for the worst religious writing of 2012.

In the face of such vitriol, Clifford Orwin provides a breath of fresh air and sets the bar high for the best religious writing of 2012. He says of Caplan's position:

It's easy to make a bad argument against . . . the office of Religious Freedom . . . You grumble that religion has often been oppressive, and thunder that Canada as a secular state ought not be pursuing religious objectives. Eventually, you subside . . . These objections miss the point. Worse, they actually make the point—in favour of the office's establishment.

Indeed. As Margaret Wentz notes in the third article,

Governments in 101 countries used some measure of force against religious individuals or groups, 'including individuals being killed, physically abused, imprisoned, detained or displaced from their homes, as well as damage to or destruction of personal or religious properties . . .' You can say that it's naïve, or dumb, or a blatant effort to appeal to the domestic religious base. But you can't say the issue doesn't matter.

But while Orwin's article gets at *why* religious freedom is important even for non-believers, there is one line in his article which could use some explanation. He notes that "freedom of religion is not itself religious; rather, it reflects the modern decision to put (and keep) religion in its proper place."

Orwin's article is aimed at unbelievers, so it is likely to be persuasive. It's also incorrect. Who exactly are those modern decision-makers, and on what grounds did they make that decision to 'put (and keep) religion in its proper place'?

The truth is that religious freedom is, in fact, religious. It needn't be simply Christian, or Hindu, or Jewish, but to suggest that it is something instituted by the state apart from considerations of what is fundamental about humanity—considerations that are *ultimate*, and therefore fairly called *religious*—is not true. As Pope Paul VI says in one of the best documents on the subject of religious freedom, "The right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself."

—Alissa Wilkinson—

Last Thursday I was at the Tate Modern in London for the highly-lauded retrospective of the work of Gerhard Richter, the German painter. Born in 1932, Richter has been working for nearly five decades in a variety of mediums and styles—from colour grids to highly detailed realism to total abstraction, and even some glass sculptures in there for good measure. The earliest works in the show are paintings of photographs; Richter painted the photos, then dry-brushed them to achieve a blurry effect. The show continues right into the present day with

## Have Think Tanks Stopped Thinking?

—Robert Joustra—

Think tanks are an odd breed, so odd in fact that I often dispense with the term entirely when people ask me what I do. Prayer around the family table, in which invocations for blessings on work are given, usually go something like, "Bless Rob, and whatever it is he does." Around that table, where there are the skills to build a house from top to bottom, the work of think tanks sounds a lot like sitting around, drinking, and taking meetings.

As it turns out, for such a poorly understood group, think tanks are an increasingly powerful cadre of activists and thinkers. The United States of America has one of the most sophisticated and developed think tank cultures, with most western states not far behind (or catching up quickly). Emerging after the first World War, think tanks were designed to serve two functions: policy development and political combat.

They have drifted over the twentieth century, however, according to Tevi Troy in his article "Devaluing the Think Tank." He says think tanks have become more polarized, more specialized and, as in the academy they so love to critique, increasingly of marginal relevance to genuine, innovative policy development. The trend, which might be summed up as "lose an election, gain a think tank" has increased both the number of these institutions, as well as their sensitivity and response to the political needs of the day.

The trend has become so pronounced, they say *good think tanks go to Washington to die*.

It is, of course, not true that the original think tank model was objective. But it is true that despite serving as places of clear values of one sort or another, these groups once had the ability to still do serious, original, expert research. These places included the Brookings Institution,

## Canada's Political Game a-Changin'

—Ray Pennings—

There is no federal election on the horizon and Parliament doesn't sit for another three weeks, but the warm-up suggests that the 2012 federal Canadian political games may be worth watching.

We are moving beyond the early speculation regarding how an agenda set by Conservative majority politics would differ from the previous five years of minority rule. The first six months after the May 2011 election, the government cleaned up its unfinished minority business. Exit plans are in place for the Wheat Board, Kyoto, and the gun registry. The budget has been implemented, a few jails are about to be built, and more criminals face minimum sentences.

It was during his year-end interviews that Prime Minister Harper telegraphed a change in approach. "I want to make sure we use it," he said regarding his majority government, prompting pundits like Maclean's Paul Wells to go all a-twitter about what this would mean in practice.

The new year is just over a week old but we are seeing some fascinating hints. While some cynically dismissed the Prime Minister's appointment of seven new senators last week as a hypocritical contradiction of his Senate reform ambitions, I'm inclined to think that this is actually setting the stage for a more determined effort at implementing the agenda. With upcoming provincial Senate elections and a caucus including a majority of his own Senators, the resistance to his Senate amendment plans have been overcome. Look for the implementation of a longer-term game plan that will see fundamental change to this institution.

his marvelous, enormous series of "Cage" paintings, named for the composer John Cage. In between these are sculptures of glass, monochromatics that play with texture, neon abstractions, and a lot more. Richter could hardly be accused of sticking to a single style (as opposed to, for instance, the work at the MoMA's retrospective of Dutch-born painter Willem de Kooning, which closes today, in which de Kooning largely sticks to the same abstract expressionist style even as it evolves and changes).

While Richter doesn't have a single cohesive style—though he returns

founded in 1916, and the Council on Foreign Relations, founded in 1921. The CFR was founded as "a program of systematic study by groups of knowledgeable specialists of differing ideological inclinations," intended to help "guide the statecraft of policymakers." Quite a departure from today's partisan battle groups.

For many years think tanks were thought of as "universities without students." Today, they're edging closer to political sales shops without scholars.

Among a representative group of leaders of think tanks founded before 1960, 53% hold Ph.D.s. Among leaders of think tanks founded from 1960-80, 23% have such degrees. And among those founded after 1980, only 13% of their leaders are highly educated.

All of which is fascinating, and all of which casts doubt on whether think tanks are actually, you know, thinking. Door-to-door salesmen are still just salesmen, even if the doors are in the national Parliament.

The point is not to get more people with Ph.D.s. That, clearly, has not solved anything. The point is rather to create the space and the culture within which think tanks might recover the serious reflection for which they were founded. Capitols are a vortex of flash and bang, an attention-deficit environment where pragmatism and media cycles rule. All the incentives of these environments—political, financial, and professional—point to further polarization of think tanks.

To get think tanks thinking again, change the environment. All of us know that before any serious reflection can happen, you need to turn off the television, turn off your phone, and log off Facebook. Serious thinking can't be tweeted. Serious think tanking can't survive the polarized vortex of a capitol and its 21st-century politics.

Then there was the surprising open letter from Natural Resources Minister Joe Oliver on Monday, lambasting "foreign special interest" and "radical groups" for gumming up the regulatory review process of Enbridge's proposed Northern Pipeline. The frenzied media response included over-the-top comparisons of the Harper government to the Syrian Assad regime, which undoubtedly had Conservative spin-doctors salivating with delight. On some issues you don't need to convince Canadians regarding all the details of your position; you just have to seem more reasonable than the opposition.

Throw into the pot some signals about a forthcoming budget with more aggressive cuts than previously anticipated, Liberal musings about turning Canada into a republic and eliminating our ties to the monarchy, and a less-than-animated NDP leadership race complicated by evident internal divisions, and the stage is set for a year in Canadian politics quite unlike those we have experienced in the recent past. The federal decision to unilaterally announce the extension of health care funding through 2018-19 and leave it to the provinces to sort out how to use it is more significant for what it signals about the Harper approach to federalism than what it says about health care. First Ministers' conferences with grand schemes about health care reform are history; a stricter application of Section 91 and 92 of the Constitution is part of the future.

None of this changes the reality that the divisions *within* Canada's political parties are as significant as the divisions *between* them, but there is little doubt that the topics and framework for the debate will be different than it was in the previous few years. Indeed, the Canadian political games are a-changin'.

## Pick Up Your Brush

to certain techniques over and over—he does have a single force behind his work that fascinated me. From the very beginning of his work, Richter has always been dialoguing with the past. The second room in the exhibit is dedicated to work that Richter produced after seeing a touring show of French bad-boy artist Marcel Duchamp, he of the urinal titled *Fountain*. In response to *Fountain*, Richter created a painting of a roll of toilet paper using his signature blurry style. Duchamp had painted *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912), then decided painting was over and there was nothing left

to do; in response, Richter painted a soft, realistic, and quite lovely painting of his own wife descending a staircase. Painting, Richter was saying, has not ended. There is much more left to do.

Each of the rooms in the exhibit helped draw the link between Richter's work and history—whether it was the history of art or artistic techniques, or Richter's own conflicted relationship with his country's and family's history in the wake of World War II.

But what was clear was this: Richter spends a great deal of time thinking about the history in which he finds himself. He is not the sort of painter

## The Discipline of Leisure

—Kyle Bennett—

My daughter and I have a custom on Saturdays: when my wife goes to ballet class, we watch Planet Earth. We find it mesmerizing. True, my three-year old doesn't express her mesmerization for as long a period of time as I do, but there's something to be said for the fact that she watches a documentary for over an hour every week!

The root menu of the DVD is a satellite picture of Earth. Nearly every week my daughter sees this before I press the play button on the remote and says, "Papa, I want to go there. I want to go to planet Earth." With a chuckle, a smidgen of superiority, but much appreciation for the wonder and naivety, I assure her that we are there—we are on planet Earth.

But in one sense, we often aren't on planet Earth.

Our experience of the world often entails a manipulation of its novelty. We lose the joy of work after a number of years. We expect our spouses to accept and care for us. We discipline our children without a flinch. Meanwhile, it wasn't long ago that we were lying awake in bed unable to compose ourselves because tomorrow was our first day on the job. It wasn't long ago we had butterflies in our stomach when we were on that first, second, or third date. It wasn't long ago when we cried after we disciplined our child for the first time.

There is a sense in which our experience of the world—our only access to it—can cause us to no longer live within it. Through our experience we transcend the world. We objectify it. We understand it. We control it. It becomes normal. In a profound, but at the same time disturbing sense, its normality causes us to step outside of it. It no longer carries an enchanted sensibility about it. The surprise is exhausted. The world becomes something we no longer live within, just in. Fascinating, isn't it? The very instrument God gave us to experience his world is the very instrument that can make us numb to it.

We should stay aware of this.

How do we experience old things anew? How do we appreciate the things that we already know, that we already have been given? How do we retrieve the joy, the butterflies, and the flinches?

Through rest.

By rest, I don't mean sleep. I mean relaxation. Time to reflect. Neuroscience draws our attention to the importance this has for the proper functioning of the brain. Our brains need rest. We cannot process, understand, or remember without rest. It is through rest that our brains are strengthened. Likewise, as the great Christian mystic Ignatius of Loyola pointed out, our spirits need rest. It is through this rest that our relationships with God are strengthened. His "examen" encourages us to take time to reflect on where God was in our days, weeks, and years.

To experience God, we must be still (Psalm 46:10). To experience God's creation, we must rest (Genesis 2:2).

Rest requires what the Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper called "leisure"—a notion he pulled from Aquinas who plundered it from Aristotle. What all of these thinkers were after was free time in order to relax and rest. We need time to consider and contemplate in order that we can experience anew. The irony of all this, as neuroscience indicates and Ignatius was attuned to, is that through our rest we become more productive and effective. We labour to rest, and rest to labour.

Leisure doesn't have to mean taking time off from work. But to a certain extent it must mean taking time within work to reflect on that work. This is a discipline that takes time to cultivate. No pun intended, it takes time to find time. We can't appreciate God's world without taking the time to think on our experience of it, and with that, how we sometimes aren't really experiencing it.

Out of the mouth of babes. On second thought, I, too, want to go to planet Earth.

who wants to do a new thing, and therefore ignores the old. Yet he's also not content to merely react or to rant; Richter dialogues with history, and then pushes it forward. He looks backward, he looks forward, and then he picks up a brush.

That is, I think, exemplary behaviour for those who would pursue cultural change. It is not enough to want something new and just do it; we must know from where we come. We must read and pursue our histories. But to stop there, to either cling to or rebel against history, is insufficient. Pick up the brush.