

"O, CANADA! LIBERAL RELIGION IN REACTIONARY TIMES"

A sermon by Rev, Brian J. Kiely

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These days we seem to be living in an anxious western world. It hasn't been this anxious since September 11, 2001. Recent polls suggest that Albertans in general and Edmontonians specifically are feeling more optimistic about this new year ahead than most other people in Canada, but you can still feel it in the air up here as well. There is stress, even fear and it has started to affect not just the way people manage their dwindling life savings, but how they treat their fellow citizens. This was brought home to me when I was chatting with one of our members on a Sunday before Christmas. This person has been in Canada for decades and probably understands its workings better than most. This person has been a hard working, tax paying and productive contributor to society in many ways. But this person wasn't born here.

One day, just when the Christmas spirit was supposed to be infusing us all with warm feelings for our fellow citizens, this person was visiting a conservative Alberta separatist chatline. It was right around the time that Parliament was collapsing and the Coalition was being cast as the biggest evil Alberta had ever seen since the devil himself, Pierre Trudeau. Our member read a posting railing against those immigrants who only come to Canada to vote Liberal so they can get free stuff. This person saw red and wrote back explaining that nearly 50 years after immigrating to Canada, and with most of those decades spent working and paying taxes, that no free benefits had ever been received. Sarcastically, the member added, "Where can I line up for the free stuff?"

Not surprisingly another person jumped into the fray, completely missing the sarcasm and called the member "a leech" and said to go home where life would not be so good and where there wouldn't be all those 'free' benefits. The member replied that many European countries offer better social service packages than Canada. However, facts that do not fit with doctrine, as often happens, tend to provoke even angrier responses. "That's why Europe is bankrupt and overrun by unemployed Muslims." Unemployed Muslims, meaning terrorists in training...the great boogeyman of the 21st century. Find a stranger, dehumanize him and make him the enemy on which everything can be blamed. It's as old as human conflict, and just is just as ugly as the day it was first put into words.

The whole interplay left our member tired and depressed.

Now I grant that a chatline featuring discussions of western separatism is not the place to go expecting a balanced debate, but this is Alberta. The majority of the population is not that hateful, but as we see from repeated Conservative election sweeps, there are many more in the

mainstream who are influenced at least to a degree by fear-mongering. Reactionary views are harder to resist when anxiety makes us shrink. That's the concern.

And as I said at the outset, we are living in a time of heightened anxiety and uncertainty. When we get anxious, we human beings have a tendency to get smaller. We draw in closer to ourselves, take fewer risks, are less likely to venture beyond the walls of the places where we feel safe. They can be walls of job security, walls of family and a close circle of friends, walls of geography and walls of social class and belief. As in Medieval times, we seek safety within the walls of the fortress, lock the doors and consider anyone on the other side of the wall as a potential threat, if not an outright enemy.

But Canada was not founded as a Medieval land. With the exception of old Quebec City and a couple of others, we have no permanent fortresses. This nation was founded by immigrants who came for trade, for expansion, for growth, for reaching out. We have a sad record of how we interacted with the indigenous populations, of course. Those who would not trade or who stood in the way were exterminated. Those who would trade were exploited by laws they did not understand that favoured the white man. I will not minimize the negative impact of the white world on native cultures. It is a serious problem that persists through today.

But that does not change the fact that the immigrant culture came to build trade routes and economic empires however crude and insensitively they did it. They did not construct permanent fortresses in which to hide. They came to stretch out and find the possibilities for wealth this land had to offer. They risked everything and came here and then risked even more to explore or build new settlements and farms. They risked whether they were the fur traders or gold miners sod busters of old or the modern day immigrants just looking for the opportunity to improve their lot sometimes doing jobs no one else wants.

The funny thing is that as each wave of immigration from a particular place came and established itself, the succeeding generations born here began to think they had been given special rights of ownership. They began to construct social fortresses, especially in times of stress. The French fought to keep the English out. The English despised the Irish, the Irish looked down upon the Italians. No one seems to have liked the Ukrainians. They and the German immigrants faced real trouble during the wars with Germany. And on the west coast, the exploitation of and racial hatred directed towards the Chinese, Japanese and East Indian immigrants rivalled the injustices done to our native populations. And now the same mistrust is being aimed at immigrants from African, Caribbean and Islamic lands.

Despite the entrepreneurial beginnings of white culture in this land, it seems that when one group gets ahead, the first thing some members wish to do is protect their advantage, their privilege. Well, I say 'get ahead' but curiously it's often those members of that cultural group who are less

successful who become the most vocal and the most willing to build the walls and man the battlements.

I would further suggest that the fortresses we build of social class and belief are far more dangerous than any we might construct of stone and steel. They are dangerous because they take almost no time to build. They require no bricks nor mortar, no architectural plan. All that's need for their construction are ideas. And it seems that the less noble the idea, the more quickly the fortress is built. Half-truths, innuendo and facts twisted into outright lies provide the foundation. The battlements are then decorated with finishing bricks about how noble the group inside is, how pure their values, how worthy they are of protection. This facile facade is slapped on without analysis or aim in the service of protecting perceived privilege. And when these pretty capstones are challenged, say on a radio talk show, the challenger is shut down by rude hosts only willing to entertain opinions that support their own limited views.

How are challenges to the fortress met? By hurling the stones left from the building of the foundation. What are those crude weapons today?

“Immigrants should go back where they came from.”

“Muslims are probably terrorists or at least sympathizers who want to destroy our way of life and our God.”

“The Coalition is treasonous.”

“The Liberals are led by a bungler...oh wait, now led by an ivory tower type who knows nothing about real Canadians.”

“The NDP are led by a witless clown named ‘red Jack’.”

“The Separatists are out to destroy our nation.”

“Ontario wants to steal our oil. They're just jealous of our wealth.”

“The Environmentalists are making up climate change to destroy our province's economy.”

Think I am wrong? Think I'm a little over the top? I invite you to spend one week looking at the letters page of the Edmonton Sun... you can check a week's worth out online if you don't wish to support the paper. I know many refuse to read the Sun, but I think it important to have some insight into the views and values of those who think differently from me. Besides, I pick up the Sun now and then as a form of exercise. The Editorial pages never fail to increase my breathing and heartbeat, sometimes to aerobic levels. While one or two well considered letters sneak in now and then, for the most part the Sun enjoys fanning the flames of discontent (any discontent – they

don't limit themselves). Many of these letters display the shallowness of thinking that goes best with fortress mentality.

Letter writers have little grasp of history, of the Constitution, of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, of the way the justice system works, of the way Confederation works. In short they don't understand Canada. Their vision and their views are limited by the fortress walls of privilege they have erected. Nothing outside of those walls can be seen as positive or meaningful. It is a terrible and sadly self-serving reductionism: inside = good; outside = bad. And that is a Medieval worldview - the kind that has led to genocidal wars and the persecution and execution of witches, heretics, foreigners and anyone else who threatened the ideas that dominated inside the fortress walls.

Now in this church we claim the 7 Principles of Unitarian Universalism. If nothing else, those Principles seek to go beyond the walls in every direction of thought. The first affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person. The second affirms the need for justice, equity and compassion in human relations. Such ideas cannot live inside walls. Indeed they are the battering rams that crash through the gates of the fortress. There are aspects of the rest of the Principles that also come into play, but these first two principles are the most threatened by the fortresses built in fear and anxiety, and the first two are the best weapons we have against them. And yes, my choice of belligerent words is deliberate and purposeful.

We are in a time of rising anxiety. The fortress walls are daily growing stouter. As religious liberals, as people who espouse values of inclusiveness and open gated radical acceptance of those who are different from us, we face a challenge. Our message is needed right now. Those who feel those hard words raining down on them need to know that there are many in the white middle classes who do not feel that way. We need to get our message out there to comfort those who are under attack and to persuade those still outside the walls, but who are fearful and uncertain not to go inside those barricades simply because of peer pressure. We need to voice alternative ways NOW.

We cannot effectively do that only by welcoming those who come through our doors beaten and battered by the fortress dwellers. We have two tasks ahead. The first is to seek out those who need us and let them know they are not alone. Many of you already do that in your work with other organizations. The efforts of the people in this community to do good in the world and change society far exceeds our proportion in the population. We have to keep that up, and it's not a bad idea to mention our Principles while you are about your work.

We need to give voice to views from outside the fortress walls. We need to call in to the radio shows we don't like... and get cut off, rudely. Like that member who immigrated so long ago, we need to go to where the rock throwers live and challenge them inside the fortress. We need to

write the MP's and MLA's who don't really represent us and let them hear our views. We need to write our Letters to the Editor. We need to chip away at the fortress, not for the purpose of bringing it down, but to give the many people still not inside the fortress another way of seeing the world.

I became a Unitarian almost 30 years ago because a minister preached sermons that showed me another way of seeing religion, a way that was bigger and broader than what I had been taught as a child. He showed me that there was another way of thinking outside of my fortress, and it became a salvation of sorts for me.

We have the ideas to change the world, friends. The ideas of rationalism and liberalism have been changing the world for centuries. That's why the fortress dwellers hate us so much. Our ideas will continue to move civilization forward millimetres at a time chipping away at privilege in a quest for equality and fairness. The current anxiety is a challenge and a setback, but it, too, will be overcome. They often joke that Unitarians don't have faith. I do have faith. I have faith in our ability to tear down those walls one brick at a time.