

The Progressive Church Takes It On the Chin



Proposed New Crest Design

Margaret Wente, a columnist for the Globe and Mail, wrote an [article](#) which lambasted my United Church of Canada as irrelevant, lacking conviction and faith, misguided, and comprised of trade unionists at prayer. (In fairness, she actually said that some people make this claim about us). The issue which occasioned her blast was the upcoming General Council meeting which will likely get some press around a motion for an economic boycott of products originating in the territory illegally occupied by

Israel.

“Two weeks from now, the United Church of Canada will assemble in Ottawa for its 41st General Council... The top item on its agenda is a resolution calling for a boycott of products from Israeli settlements. Fortunately, nobody cares what the United Church thinks about Israeli settlements, or anything else for that matter, because the United Church doesn’t matter any more.” Ouch!

She then goes on to acknowledge that once we were a pillar of Canadian society and our leaders were highly respected. “But today, the church is literally dying. The average age of its members is 65. They believe in many things, but they do not necessarily believe in God. Some congregations proudly describe themselves as “post-theistic,” which is a good thing because, as one church elder said, it shows the church is not “stuck in the past.” Besides, who needs God when you’ve got Israel to kick around?”

Don’t hold back, Margaret. I have a grudging respect for

Margaret Wente. She is politically conservative and very opinionated, but she rarely makes assertions that aren't backed up by facts (although I may differ on the interpretation of those facts). She interviewed my friend and colleague, retired minister, the Rev. Dr. David Ewart, to bolster her argument. What she said about David sounded like my friend, who also has more than a few bones to pick with our beloved denomination. The fish bone that sticks sideways in his craw is our almost exclusive focus on social justice issues, and a tendency to intellectualize our faith. Gone is our deep conviction, born of a genuine love for G_d and Jesus Christ—the heart dimension of the faith, grounded in spiritual practice and a felt sense of G_d's presence as a real force in our life. This is a generalization, of course, which David would be the first to point out. But I do think there are elements of truth in this portrait.

When I was in seminary, back in the Ice Age, the postmodernist turn had seized the academic agenda. If I wanted to take a course in prayer/meditation I needed to go to the RC seminary down the road. There was a strong bias against the "privatization" of faith. What mattered was our engagement with the "real" world. I read every feminist and liberation theologian. Systemic transformation of societies oppressive institutions defined the life of faith. This bias pervaded our national office. It got to the point when practically every Sunday was designated by a social justice cause: Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday, Black Sunday, Earth Day, Indigenous Sunday, UN Peace Sunday, Rights of Women Sunday, on and on... Eventually, I stopped paying attention. Don't get me wrong, though. Each of these issues is real and worthy of our attention and I am proud of our leadership on social justice issues.

But what I found after about a decade of preaching social

justice is that the folks in the congregation were sick of it. They felt assaulted. It's hard to hear week after week after week about the pervasiveness of injustice, because it is well, systemic, and we're part of the system. Eventually you start feeling like crap and stop listening, or you point fingers at those who even worse oppressors than you are, or you get you and your family off the grid, join a commune, and start dumpster diving in solidarity with the homeless. Like that's going to happen. What these poor souls were hearing week after week was a very bleak view of the human being. Come to think of it, this is the liberal church's version of original sin. Everything is wrong. You are wrong! The food you are eating, the car you are driving, the bank into which you are depositing your money, the clothes you are wearing, the fertilizer you are putting on your grass, the holiday to Disneyland, the television you are watching, your job, your beliefs about G_d. Name just about anything. It's wrong.



The only path to integrity was to stand up and “speak truth to power”. When you unpack this postmodernist mantra, you realize that buried in it are some powerful assumptions. Namely, we have the truth, and “they”—the evil imperialists—have all the power. This preserved our dignity temporarily, in the way it separated us from “them”. We desperately needed a “them” and we felt the most righteous and “on-purpose” when we could find an unambiguous “them” to condemn. The problem for me was that the more I read about these issues the more difficult it became to make this separation and the more complex these issues became. The “truth” we were speaking to power all too often wasn't actually evidence-based.

This is why I'm concerned about the motion for an economic boycott of Israel. I've been to a great many church

conferences over the years. They are attended by good-hearted people, smart people, for whom I have great respect. But how many have read even one book that lays out in a dispassionate manner the complexities of Middle East politics? The temptation to get the church back “on-purpose” and resolve the complexity by making an unambiguous pronouncement is strong, and I think, unwise.



Using an integral frame, reality arises in, through, and as four fundamental quadrants or perspectives, each of which is irreducible to the other. These are: the interior of the individual (the “I” space and the realm of consciousness; the interior of the collective (the realm of culture, the “we” space comprised of all the conscious and unconscious agreements that shape our collective life together; the outside of the individual (physical stuff that science measures, like brains, bodies, and behaviour—“it” space); the outside of the collective (the geological, biological, social, political, and economic systems in which we are embedded—“its” space). The temptation is to confuse one’s preferred perspective with the totality of reality, what Wilber calls [“quadrant absolutization”](#). For three decades my denomination privileged the lower right quadrant, and at best neglected the upper and lower left, but at worst, confused the totality of life of faith with the lower right quadrant—the transformation

of social systems. This is why secular journalists like Margaret Wente intuitively feel that we're missing something essential.

One possible reason for this reductionistic tendency in liberal churches is that modernism demolished any credibility in a supernatural, interventionist G_d. The impact of this was a creeping, functional atheism among the clergy. A G_d that can't do anything is useless to us. Conviction was replaced by doubt. The Question replaced the answer. We became suspicious of conviction. What filled in this existential void and kept despair at bay for a time were social issues. We could be convicted about injustice. Which is fine and good, but it's a poor substitute for a deep trust (upper left quadrant) in an originating source of Creativity and Love, of which we are individually and collectively manifestations.

It's not too late for us to embrace a more integral vision of Christianity, following in the footsteps of Jesus who displayed a passionate love for his "Father", for his disciples, and for the marginalized. His consciousness grounded "in his Father/Mother's love". As a mystic I assume that he knew himself to be a manifestation of God's light and love. The culture that he promoted he called "the Kin(g)dom". The systems that perpetuated injustice he exposed and undermined. Through a deep abiding in the mind and heart of G_d (quadrant 1.) and participation in an intentional community of those committed to spiritual practice (quadrant 2.) we gain sufficient wisdom to know when it is time to metaphorically overturn the tables in the Temple (quadrants 3. and 4.) and be prepared to suffer the consequences. [Malcolm Gladwell](#) estimates that true "genius" is cultivated in any field only after 10,000 hours of practice. I wonder if we've put in our 10,000 hours in quadrants 1 and 2?

