

The Contribution of Religion to Society

(Speech by Thomas Collins, Archbishop of Toronto to the Empire Club of Canada – May 31, 2007)

I: An Analog Church in a Digital World

Recently I participated in a gathering of religious leaders convoked by the mayor. Dozens of religions in our city were represented. Their adherents constitute the vast majority of the citizens of the Toronto area, and that in itself is significant: religion is a vital presence in our society.

I myself have just begun my mission as the Archbishop of Toronto, and am responsible for a community of over 1.6 million Catholic Christians in this area. It would, of course, be presumptuous of me to speak for believers of other faiths, but I trust that my remarks may resonate to some degree with the way in which they see the role of religion in the world.

It is always a good sign when a speaker takes off his watch at the beginning of a speech, and places it before him. It gives the audience hope that he believes that a speech to be immortal need not be eternal. But I am doing so for another reason. My watch has an analog display, not a digital one: it does not show individual numbers flashing by, so that as soon as you see a moment in time it is gone, replaced by its successor moment, which itself is instantaneously replaced.

The display on my watch is analog, and I find that to be a more humane way of representing time: each hand of the watch indicates the present moment by relating the present to the past and to the future. It provides a concrete visual image of the immaterial concept of time, and identifies each individual moment by placing it in its context, the context that gives it meaning.

Analogy is the idea that what matters is relationship, connectedness, and context: A is to B, as C is to D. Religion reflects an analog vision of reality, as it celebrates relationship: we are brothers and sisters, children of God. People of faith see the patterns of relationship that reveal the meaning of both the material world and of human life. The purpose of our life on earth is found in the context of the divine providence that envelops us, and of the future goal that directs us. Jesus summarizes the point of human existence by identifying the two great relationships that matter in life: love of God and love of neighbour.

We live in a web of relationships, and through faith see the pattern of connections that show the purpose of our brief journey through this world. Even the image of a journey, so common in religion, speaks of a context: we understand where we are in life by reflecting (often in a spirit of repentance) on where we have been so far on life's pathway, and (in a spirit of hope) on where we are going.

Religion offers analog wisdom – the wisdom that sees relationships - to a digital world, one in which we can so easily become lonely individuals, without purpose or direction, disconnected, rootless, and going nowhere faster and faster. We live in an increasingly dis-integrated society, in which the human bonds that unite and give life are fraying.

Two symbols of a world that has lost a sense of human context and personal encounter are the computer screen and the T.V. screen, both of which can be helpful instruments, but both of which suck up time like a vacuum cleaner, offering the illusion of community while often providing only an alienating individual experience of impersonal and abstract images.

I will present four brief notes on contributions which religion offers to our multicultural society, each one arising out of an analog vision, a conviction that relationship and context give purpose to life:

- 1) Religion enhances local communities in which human relationships can flourish;
- 2) Local religious communities make massive contributions to the common good of all society through deeds of charity and social action;
- 3) They contribute to the common good of society by bringing to bear on current social issues the insights arising from their practical engagement in them, and from their ancient heritage of wisdom.
- 4) God is ultimate beauty, truth, and goodness, and just as religious communities contribute acts of goodness and insights into truth, they endow society with beauty.

II: Four Contributions of Religion to society

1) Religion enhances local communities in which human relationships can flourish

In its social teaching, the Catholic Church places great stress on subsidiarity, the idea that in a world in which the individual person can feel lost when confronted with the power of the state or of the global corporation, for that matter, it is important for a healthy society that smaller communities flourish, so that people can relate to one another not in an abstract way, at a distance, but rather in humane relationships based on reverence for the personal dignity of each of the children of God. We need to know our neighbours, and to live in personal relationship with them, conscious of the impact of our actions upon them.

Sometimes it is necessary that action be taken at the higher levels of a community or organization, because the more grassroots level simply cannot deal with the issue at hand. But normally it is best that decisions be made as close as possible to the level where people live.

Distance can create an atmosphere of abstraction that diminishes our sense of personal responsibility. This is why we will write something outrageous and harsh in an e-mail that we would never say to someone's face. Pause for a moment before hitting the send button.

Distance can destroy the life-giving personal context of human relationship. The flick of a distant pen can throw thousands out of work, causing immense suffering to their families. Better to look in the face those who are affected by one's decisions, at least imaginatively.

A powerful way of doing that is to see that as much of life as is possible happens in communities of a human scale within the wider community of the state. That is why the Catholic Church supports the right of people to join together to form co-operatives, and credit unions, and labour unions, and any other societies that at least make possible relationship at a human level.

Religious communities themselves play such a role in society, providing a forum for human relationship. A challenge for Churches is to be sure that our parishes do just that.

The ultimate community of human relationship is the family, and in our individualistic society the family is under great pressure, often fracturing. Look at the divorce rate. Our goal must be to sustain the family, through which each of us is given the gift of life, and in which each of us is nurtured. That is why the Catholic Church celebrates marriage as the stable covenant of a man and a woman faithful in love and open to the gift of life.

A literary expression of the religious vision of communities of a human scale based on relationships of love is found in the writings of two Catholic authors, G. K. Chesterton, and J.R.R. Tolkien, especially in his saga in which a small band of self-sacrificing hobbits and their friends triumph over the totalitarian forces of Mordor, where the shadows lie, and where the personal dignity of the individual is lost in the grip of the massive state.

2) Religious communities make massive contributions to the common good of all society through deeds of charity and social action

A second contribution of religious communities is found in social action: a helping hand to those in need. Practical charity flows out of communities that cherish relationships. Imagine what would happen if suddenly our city were deprived of the social assistance offered daily to the most vulnerable by all of our religious communities.

For a Christian, the words of Jesus in Matthew 25 provide the vision of personal relationship that guides our actions: whatever you do for the least of my brothers and sisters, you do for me.

In Edmonton, where I was bishop for many years, there is an enormous network of Catholic social services that grew out of one priest's meditation upon that Gospel text.

In Toronto, limiting myself only to a few of those actions of the Catholic community with which I am most familiar, I think of the religious sisters who established health care in our province. I think of the food and shelter for the homeless unobtrusively provided by the Church, and of the first residence in Toronto for those suffering from HIV-AIDS. Then there are all the works of Catholic parishes and healthcare institutions, the religious orders,

Catholic Charities, and ShareLife, the St. Vincent de Paul Society, and works of personal charity.

Let me also pay tribute to the other religious communities of our city are also involved in such works of service, such as the Salvation Army hostels, the Fred Victor Mission, the Yonge Street Mission, and the multi-faith Out of the Cold program.

If you are vulnerable in Toronto, it is highly likely that the one helping you will be part of a religious organization, or serving from a religious motive.

3) Religious communities bring to bear on current issues the wisdom of their heritage

Religious people may well disagree on important issues of doctrine, but they have a long tradition of working together to address social issues. They do so because they insist on reverence for the human person, whom they consider to be made in the image and likeness of God.

When religious people take part in the democratic conversation they bring to the table an invaluable tradition of ancient wisdom, a passionate concern to defend the vulnerable, and the credibility that comes from the fact that they daily contribute to the well-being of the community by caring for those most in need.

It is essential to distinguish here between on the one hand the profession of specific religious doctrines based on faith and divine revelation, and on the other hand the reasoned analysis of social issues offered by members and leaders of religious communities.

People of faith are obviously motivated by their faith commitment, and informed by the ancient wisdom of their spiritual tradition. What they contribute to the general discussion of the problems of society, however, are insights that are based not only on faith but on reason and natural justice. They invite the public to consider the insights they offer, and to assess them sincerely and critically, and not to dismiss them unheard because they come from religious people.

Obviously, a person can, as a matter of freedom of speech and religion, speak from a religious perspective when discussing social issues in a multi-cultural society. But to be persuasive to citizens who profess various religions including the religion of secularism, an appeal to reason is also necessary. There is a wisdom in religious tradition which can be shared with persons of other faiths or of no faith, and shared not only through an appeal to faith but also an appeal to reason.

With this in mind believers who, after all, constitute most of the citizenry, have every right and duty to become actively engaged in the public discussion of various, often contentious, social issues, and to do so with courtesy and respect. Whatever the irritation caused to those who profess a secularist faith – and secularism is itself a kind of faith – it is of great value to any healthy society that a strong religious voice speak out on all issues of public concern.

I would note, of course, that what I have just said is quite different from a common contemporary vision of the place of religion in society, one in which, in fact, there is no place for religion in the public forum. In that view, religion is a kind of personal emotional experience, a security blanket that some individuals apparently need in order to handle the stresses of life in a dangerous world. It should be neither seen nor heard, but should be safely tucked away in irrelevant corners of private life, and perhaps provide an occasional bit of pageantry to enliven the social scene. Religion, in this view, is tolerated only as a kind of hobby, like stamp collecting.

A major reason why that view of religion is attractive to many, is that too often in history people have murdered in the name of assorted religions, and have poured the sauce of faith over every kind of iniquity. No wonder that people say: forget about religion. If you must have it, keep it safely private where it can do no harm.

But, as with anything else, it is in those who live to the full the reality they espouse that we see the true meaning of that reality. Fairness dictates that religion be judged by its saints, not by its sinners.

Anyone can put on a hockey jersey and stumble around the rink, but that reveals nothing about hockey. All that is revealed is the incompetence of the individual.

If you want to see what hockey really is, you look at a great hockey player, perhaps (and I am betraying my recent life as an Edmontonian) Wayne Gretzky in the glory days of the Edmonton Oilers. That is why the Catholic Church highlights saints: it says “This is how it is done” “This is what it looks like.” To see Catholic faith lived to the full, look to Mother Theresa, look to Pope John Paul.

4) Religious communities endow society with beauty

Beauty, truth, and goodness are the universal signs of God’s presence and of that which is greatest in humanity. I have already referred to the acts of goodness and the insights into truth that religious communities contribute. But they also endow our society with beauty. Look around our city, at the art within the Royal Ontario Museum or the Art Gallery of Ontario, or the religious buildings on our streets. Listen to the great music and read the great literature. Religious conviction is now, as it always has been, a profound source of beauty.

The heavens proclaim the glory of God, and so do the artistic creations of those who reflect through their art the beauty that is found in the harmony of creation.

Art reflects the traces of the divine made manifest in nature. Although much great art is explicitly religious, that is not essential, and many artists inspired by the vision of faith produce work which manifests that vision simply through its beauty. Tolkien noted that the Lord of the Rings was unconsciously Catholic in the writing, and consciously so in the revision, but it can be enjoyed by those who simply appreciate the beauty, truth, and goodness found within.

What is important is that art and popular culture enhance a life of beauty, truth, and goodness, not detract from it. Why is it that before so many TV shows we are warned that viewer discretion is advised? We can bemoan that, but we also need to encourage artists, poets, musicians, and writers, and especially those who shape popular culture, not necessarily to produce religious art, but to draw the inspiration for their work from that which is life-giving, and which arises out of an ability to recognize the patterns of order and relationship that are the soul of beauty.

Religious communities live by analogy: they see connections between God and humanity, between the spiritual and the material, and between the human persons who form the wider community. They value relationships and context and harmonious order.

Religion offers to our multi-cultural society the essential gift of communities that provide a context for human dignity within the overwhelming and at times dehumanizing reality that is the secular state.

Religion offers society immense contributions of practical charity and social action.

Religion offers rational insights derived from a rich tradition of wisdom, a wisdom that can further the common good of our democratic society made up of many cultures and many faiths. Believers in each of them can enrich the whole community by becoming actively engaged in the democratic conversation.

And religion endows our society with beauty that witnesses to the spiritual greatness of the human condition.

III: Conclusion: Time's up

Time's up. Tick, tick, tick.

That is another way in which a watch can teach us about the contribution of religion to society. Not only does the religious vision reveal the context that makes life meaningful; it also reveals the practical significance of the fact of death, which none of us escapes. At the moment of death, no one wishes to have spent more time at the office.

Time's up. Life is short. Tick. Tick. Tick. How we spend our brief journey through life matters, and what matters most are the things that cannot be weighed or measured on a material scale: the wonder of the divine harmony in the universe, the beauty of art and music, the marvelous spiritual complexity of thought and language, and most of all the love which unites us and, as Dante saw, moves the sun and the other stars. These are things which religion grasps, but which escape the too coarse net of materialism, which is the ultimate delusion.

Religion reveals that what matters when time is up is not the things that we have acquired but the love that we have given away.