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# Understanding My Brothers and Sisters

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On March 13, 2012, the world welcomed in a new Pope. I remember watching the white smoke with intrigue as I caught a scene of the Vatican on the news. Masses of people, pilgrims they were called, had gathered, awaiting the news of their new religious leader. I was moved and inspired. It was the immense sense of faith and hope of my Catholic brothers and sisters that moved me. Being myself Muslim, one may wonder why I call Catholics my brothers and sisters. I have come to realize that we can no longer isolate ourselves from religious communities that differ from our own. Our identities are interconnected now more than ever before, and increased mobility and communication between peoples of the world are causing increasing encounters with diverse others. I was due to catch a theatrical performance at my children's school that afternoon, and as I headed over I thought of my need to send my warm wishes and prayers for blessings to my Catholic friends and colleagues. This comforting thought, however, was followed by a perplexing one. Apart from a handful of people I knew the religious identity of, for the most part I had no idea of the religious affiliation, or lack thereof, of those I would consider my more intimate associates.

The present condition presents itself with a large selection of individualized meanings of religious identification (O'Toole 2006; Esposito, Fasching and Lewis 2008; Taylor 2008). There are multiplicities of spiritual, religious and secularly oriented paths by which people seek meaning. According to Esposito, Fasching and Lewis (2008) we have moved away from traditional societies in which the "majority of people share common religious stories and rituals" (p 5). We have also moved beyond modern

notions of society in which science replaced religion as the most certain form of knowledge. Present conditions, Esposito, Fasching and Lewis (2008) suggested, are characterized by a pluralism of world views in which religions and cultures intermingle to create diverse and particular beliefs and expressions. A tension is apparent to me. On the one hand is an interconnected global community of religiously devout citizens. On the other hand is religious particularity further differentiated by diverse interpretations and contexts within which belief and practice are occurring.

One can turn to Canadian religious demographics, which Bramadat (2007, 2008) stated is expected to see drastic changes, to obtain a sense of the increasingly multiple ways in which Canadians identify themselves religiously. A snapshot of changes between 1991 and 2001 demarcates the number of non-Christians, such as Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs and Hindus, had more than doubled (Statistics Canada 2003). It is estimated that by 2017, more than 10 per cent of Canadians will be non-Christians (Bramadat 2007). Beaman (2012a) suggested it is important to query, how are people religious? That is, "when Statistics Canada asks people to identify their religious affiliation we learn almost nothing about how people are religious or what they think religious behaviour is" (p 270). The increasing plurality, diversity of interpretation and contribution of cultural particularities cannot be appreciated through statistics. The lack of appreciation of individualized meanings of religious identification is attributed by Bramadat (2009) to a sense that conversations about religion are considered to be too volatile to have in

public space. Instead they are reserved for the private sphere. For those conversations that do enter public space, there is a tendency “to frame the religious phenomena ... in terms of a binary essentialism in which all religions are essentially oriented toward love, peace, kindness and egalitarianism” (Bramadat 2007, 121). This decontextualized approach that uses neutral language may contribute to “safe” conversations but does not contribute to understanding that in fact religions are constituted by people, and thus by their beliefs, interpretations, expressions and assumptions (Bramadat 2007; Bramadat and Seljak 2013).

Relegating conversations about religion to the private sphere is likely a by-product of attempting to create a neutral government that does not appear to favour any one religion and a multicultural nation that makes room for religious diversity. However, excluding religion from public life creates myths about the secular temperament of our society (Beaman 2012b). Taylor (2008) recommended a need to understand private and public in a manner that supports a positive rather than a subtraction story as it relates to religion and society. That is, by using the term *secular* to describe public life, one cannot assume that a commitment to religiosity has waned. It is not that we are more secular due to the erosion of religious belief. Rather, from a positive viewpoint, there is a plethora of options and commitments today, of sacred, religious and spiritual varieties along with secular ones. Secularism in public space is in fact directed to the state and its institutions (Bouchard and Taylor 2008; Woehrling 2011), ensuring their neutrality with respect to religion. “In point of fact, religions already occupy this space and pursuant to the charters, religious groups and the faithful have the freedom to publicly display their beliefs” (Bouchard and Taylor 2008, 43). This is in keeping with Habermas (2005), who reminded us that most religious citizens do not have a reason to artificially divide secular and religious in their minds. Religion provides meaning to the entirety of one’s existence for many Canadians and, therefore, how can we expect an individual to be divided into a secular being in public space and a religious one in private?

As a microcosm of broader public space is the school classroom, one in which the Calgary Board of Education (CBE), as of 2005, permits the teaching of courses on religion within the Alberta program of studies (Calgary Board of Education 2012). According to the CBE, this will enable students to gain understanding of world religions and the influence of religion in such areas as politics, economics, history, literature and the arts (Calgary Board of Education 2007).

The fairly recent introduction of religion in the curriculum manifests against a historical backdrop of the secularization of schools. Commencing in the 1960s, through to its widespread prevalence by the establishment of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982, removal of religion from Canadian public schools secured state neutrality and accommodated religious diversity (Seljak 2008, 2009, 2012).

However, the virtual absence of teaching religion in public schools has led to an intellectual gap and religious illiteracy (Bramadat 2007; Bramadat and Biles 2005; Moore 2006, 2007; Seljak 2008, 2009; Sweet 1997). Religious literacy can be defined as a basic understanding of the world’s religious traditions, the internal diversity of expressions and beliefs within each tradition, and the role of religion in social, cultural and political life (Moore 2006, 2010). According to Moore (2007), few teachers have had the opportunity to learn about religion in a way that is appropriate for teaching in public schools and are “teaching about religion in the context of deeply rooted and widespread religious illiteracy” (p 181).

There is hope! The introduction of religion in Calgary public schools can contribute to basic understanding of what it means to be a Muslim, or Jewish, or Hindu which Peck et al (2010, 270) suggested, will provide Canadians a “sense of how to engage with the wider world.” Add on multidisciplinary curriculum that unravels religious beliefs and expressions as internally diverse, dynamic and contextually dependant phenomena and you have the ability to nurture religious literacy.

Turning to global citizenship education, Evans et al (2009) presented two relevant goals that examine diverse beliefs and world views that develop “critical literacy capacities” (p 21):

- To explore and reflect upon one’s identity and membership through a lens of world-mindedness (e.g. indigenous; local; national; cultural; religious) and by coming to know others, I come to know myself
- To examine diverse beliefs, values, and world-views within and across varied contexts that guide civic thinking and action (e.g. cultural; religious; secular; political)

Ultimately the tension between a global community with shared values and individual religious differences can be a healthy one if framed by human rights and engagement with those religiously different than ourselves. The remarkable thing is that these encounters do not dilute our identities. Rather, they can encourage self-search and a clarification of our

assumptions along with their origins and consequences. In asking Who are You, we are searching and strengthening the sense of Who am I?

On the day the new Pope was elected I saw thousands of religious Catholics on the news. Around me, I saw few. The apparent familial connection I felt with Catholics as the Pope was declared was marked by a significant lack of understanding of Catholicism and the lived religious and cultural experiences of Catholic Canadians. Worldwide, and almost every day, issues about religion are arising all around us. They are a result of an intersection between increased religious diversity, religious freedom and various understandings of what it means to be religious in public space. However, an understanding of and conversation about how people are religious in daily life and conversations that inform us about the particular lived experiences of our friends and colleagues seem scarce, both inside and outside the walls of schools. The plurality of religious world views one encounters necessitates an appropriate religious literacy in order to be equipped to analyze and discern the role of religion in a fellow human being's life and within society in general. For me, this will start by asking who my Catholic Canadian siblings are and what the Pope's appointment means to them.

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