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Letting God on the bus



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Church, mosque, synagogue and temple were inspiring places to be on the weekend for the millions of Canadians who attended, but you'd never know it by what's being told in the media lately. A spin cycle is under way on faith that, if continued to let ride, robs us of Charter rights and intrinsic values that have made our country great.

Politics – first with an election in Quebec, then in Ontario – has been pimping off the edges of religion, using it as a wedge issue to divide voters.

The result seems to be a populist opinion that no religion in public is the preferred route. Just how high can you run up the faith flag in this country without getting shot at?

Elections and public hearings aside, I think Bus Stop Bible Studies are a good case study. These advertisements ask things such as “Weary of life?” or “Finding joy?” and then prompt readers into a matching Bible verse that's printed and sponsored by churches in the ad banners of public transit.

British Columbia banned this religious expression before it even got a trial run, but bus riders in Toronto have been exposed to it. Nearby Mississauga has forbidden Bible ads to ensure the city remains a “neutral and inclusive environment,” while Ottawa has approved it. And so the issue Ping-Pongs across the country – yes in Alberta, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, no in Kingston and Oakville, Ont.

Clearly, we are confused over what place, if any, religion can have on a bus ride.

The character of God is to be in communication with the human race, so Canada is likely to face this dilemma about faith in public for some time yet. Preparing for the “reasonable accommodation” hearings in Quebec, Glen Smith of McGill University put it this way:

“You can't legislate these things – these things come about by people who live them out in dialogue which says the common good has to be built on a horizon that is not just about the here and now. The human person is not just created to use a credit card, to stop at stoplights and to treat the other person just like they're a post. There are things that are a part of human life that go beyond the here and now. This is the transcendence which is so important to life.”

There's not much empirical research to back up that gut feeling, but sociologist Reg Bibby recently surveyed 1,600 Canadians on 12 values that make for good people and found that believers in God were more inclined to hold values such as honesty, kindness, patience and generosity than those who ignore God. “To the extent that Canadians say goodbye to God, we may find that we pay a significant social price,” he said in his University of Lethbridge Project Canada report.

Interesting that of all the exposures to transcendence that have come via Toronto's placement of Bus Stop Bible Studies, there have been only five complaints.

The comment that mattered most to Marketing Magazine in its analysis of why the ads should not be banned came from a woman who wrote a letter to the Toronto Transit Commission: “If I had not seen that advertisement, I probably would have jumped off the subway platform; that's how depressed I was about life. ... Please keep them coming.”

That's why the hunger for God can never be pushed into private or one size fits all, and it's also why we have always cared enough to allow society a chance to be publicly exposed to transcendence.

It's a Charter right that, for the mystery of our lives, deserves all the protection we can give it.