Chapter 10

Media Narratives of the Interactions between Religions and Cultures in Canada

Richelle R. Wiseman
LACUNA Group International, Canada & USA

ABSTRACT

Canadian immigration patterns suggest that as the country retains its commitment to intake some half a million immigrants a year from Southeast Asia, Africa, South and Central America, the dynamics of religious diversity and interactions in Canada are bound to increase. A fixed and rigid “secularist” mindset among news outlets, magazine boardrooms, film companies, and other media will miss the richness of the creativity, diversity, imagination, and interactions between cultures and religions, which will continue to form the “street narratives” that the media’s meta-narrative overlooks. This chapter documents instances of where the “meta-narrative” is seen to prevail and distort the accurate portrayal of religion and culture in Canada, where it has missed the interactions between religions, and the contributions that culture and religion are making to each other.

INTRODUCTION

In Canada, a country which celebrates its cultural and religious diversity, the media’s secularist mindset prevents accurate cover-
paper will identify the nature of the “secularist meta-narrative” of the media, and what the consequences are in terms of the loss of cultural understanding and awareness for the wider Canadian society.

THE MEDIA’S LIMITATIONS

You are a journalist, aboard a deep sea diving vessel with a camera, hoping to do a story on the enormous diversity of underwater sea life. Your camera is capable of viewing a swath about 20 metres across and 100 metres ahead. The deeper you go, the harder it is to see as sunlight diminishes. Imagine you spend several days photographing a few square kilometers and then you resurface. You are impressed with what you know. You have no idea how much you did not see, how much you do not know. But guess what….time to move onto the next news assignment….to photograph caribou running across the tundra in the NWT. So that’s it for your knowledge of the sea; all you have to go on is the footage you took, in one tiny spot, in a three day period. And this is your stock footage which you will use and re-use many times.

To use this as an illustration of how the media regards religion would be an exaggeration, but it helps to make the point. What do the media use to reference, to grasp, to understand, to report on religious enterprise and impulse in Canada? For over twenty years, I have been a communications professional with direct experience and exposure to the wide spectrum of Canadian faith communities. Ever since I helped to start VISION TV: Canada’s Faith Network in 1988, through to and including my work with the Centre for Faith and the Media from 2003-2010, I have been confronted with the relationship between the media and religion. It seems to me quite a bit like the three days of footage of a tiny speck of the ocean.

“The media”, broadly defined as news media, film, television, magazine, and online sources, present issues and stories about religion and its interaction with culture in Canada. Jeff Sharlet, who is editor of The Revealer, New York University’s online review of religion and the press, suggests, “Religion in the true, broad sense underlies, controls, permeates at least half the stories in the news, probably a lot more” (as cited in Marshall, Gilbert, Ahmanson, eds., 2009).

The Centre for Faith and the Media was founded in 2003 with a grant from Canadian Heritage, Multiculturalism, to help improve religion reporting in Canada. Up until then, the Ministry had viewed cultural diversity in Canada as ethnic, racial, and linguistic, and had almost completely ignored the issue of Canada’s growing religious diversity. Then 9/11 changed that. Suddenly politicians and journalists realized that religion was an important force in society, and it could no longer be ignored. However, while religion cannot be ignored entirely, it most certainly can be marginalized, distorted, and caricatured.

THE SECULARIST META-NARRATIVE PREVAILS

Of fundamental importance is the dominance of secularist thinking and secularism as these provide the over-arching meta-narrative for the media and its approach to religious subjects, individuals, and issues. Secularists tend to regard religion and religious issues with a particular worldview, and one which shapes the portrayals of religion across the “mainstream” media. They see religion as a