

Tyranny Of The Minority?

Dagmar Gontard-Zelinkova

In the beginning of March 2011, a newly elected Councilor in her riding of Owen Sound made news when she asked her colleagues to “rethink” the recitation of the Christian prayer. “It is not a very inclusive start to a council meeting”, she said. However, one of her fellow councilors strongly disagreed. He argued that the Lord’s Prayer was part of the tradition and the Council should not capitulate before “the tyranny of the minority.”

The appropriateness of reciting the Lord’s Prayer before a municipal council meeting has been questioned throughout Ontario for many years. On September 23rd of 1999, the Ontario Court of Appeal declared the practice illegal. Notwithstanding the Court’s decision, a number of municipalities have continued with the recitation, imposing the Lord’s Prayer on everybody, be they Christians or not.

Over the centuries, religion has weighed heavily on peoples, monitoring every aspect of their lives. While certain barbaric practices, such as burning or torturing of the non-believers, are no longer used, religion still exercises a considerable degree of tyranny. A couple of recent occurrences: a Catholic school board near Toronto banned gay-straight alliances, on the pretext that they might threaten “Catholic values,” and, in Thunder Bay, a Catholic school suspended a group of teenagers who dared to express their opinion on abortion by displaying the word “choice.” Victims of religious tyranny are a legion. One particularly disturbing example is a friend of mine, an atheist whose children are baptized. Why? Because, in the eyes of my friend’s parents, not to baptize their grandchildren would have been unthinkable. Further, my friend, who is now president of a freethought association, had to wait till his parents died before he could disclose his atheism.

In the light of this, the words of the councilor from Owen Sound resonate with a bitter

irony. And they really speak to me, as I too am part of that “tyrannical minority”; indeed, on January the 26th, 2011, I too addressed my municipal council and asked the councilors to stop reciting the Lord’s Prayer.

My very first encounter with religious interference in the civic sphere goes back some 25 years. At that time, whoever was hired to work for the Government of Ontario had to take an oath on the Bible, a tradition of which I was not aware. When I went through the hiring process, and when the Bible was presented to me, I was taken by surprise. “Oh, no!” was my spontaneous reaction. I still remember the surprise which showed, also, on the face of the person who was holding the book in front of me. “What do you mean...?” she managed to utter. Having recovered my composure, I quietly explained that, as a non-believer, I could not, in all honesty and conscience, swear on something that, for me, had absolutely no meaning. We agreed that I would “swear on my honour.”

I don’t know what I would have done if that civil servant had insisted I swear on the Bible? Today, I realize how lucky I was that I was able to reach that person through reasoning.

Time went by. Recently, I again found myself on government premises and, before testifying at the hearing, was invited to swear. However, this time, I was asked if I preferred to take the oath on the Bible or to swear on my honour? The question came quite naturally and, quite naturally, I chose to swear on my honour.

What has happened over the last two decades? My guess is that more and more people have declined, as I did, to swear on the Bible, which led to the striking out of the obligation to swear on that book. This conforms to our Charter of Rights which provides not only for freedom of religion, but also for freedom of conscience. And of course, freedom of conscience and thought implies freedom from religion.

History shows us that religion and politics don't mix well. They should be separate. Secularism is the way to go. Secularism boils down to two words: separation and respect. Our Charter of Rights and Freedoms protects them both. Yet, due to religious tyranny, the path to secularism is strenuous and long. While the recitation of Lord's Prayer was declared illegal in 1999, in 2006 Secular Ontario had to write letters to 28 municipalities reminding them of the Court of Appeal's decision.

When the letter reached my municipality, I was a silent witness to what happened: the letter was filed away. At that time, I was a regular attendee at municipal meetings on behalf of my local association. Yet, as a respectful volunteer, wanting to avoid any possible conflict of interests, I did not feel free to stand up and speak against the practice with which I could not agree. Like my atheist friend who baptized his children, I too felt that my hands were tied. However, a couple of years later, when my volunteering efforts were recognized by my municipality and my name suggested for an official volunteer certification, I gathered my courage and asked my council to be included. I wrote a letter in which I explained that, as an atheist, I resented the stigma attached to atheism, and I humbly asked the Council to let me say an atheist invocation, once or twice a year.

I will never forget the long silence that descended on the room when my letter came before the councilors' eyes. I was desperately clinging to the hope that my request would be accepted. Finally, when the verdict came, it took me long time to realize that the reply to my request was "NO".

Time went by. In the fall of 2010, the municipal election brought four new councilors into my municipality. My hope was revived. I mused that with new blood a new attitude might emerge. I pondered about the best way to address the issue of the Lord's Prayer, and I decided on an official, yet brief presentation. My

much longer and detailed essay on secularism would be distributed well ahead of the Council meeting, to give the councilors the time to have a better understanding of my request.

My presentation of January 26, 2011 was reported in detail in our local media. "In a thoughtful and well prepared presentation to council", wrote the journalist, "Dagmar Gontard-Zelinkova formally requested council to stop saying the Lord's Prayer... She reminded council of her informal request a few years ago, and also that Secular Ontario requested this council not to use the prayer..."

My speech and my essay on secularism were appreciated by the public at large. A Catholic friend wrote to me: "After having read your essay, it would be hard to argue against secularism." Yet, neither my speech nor my essay had struck a favourable chord with my municipal council and the motion to continue with the reciting

of the prayer was passed.

On March 10th 2011, my lawyer sent the council a "cease and desist" letter to remind them that saying the Lord's Prayer is illegal by virtue of the 1999 Court decision. The letter also stated that non-compliance would result in legal action.

I have now obviously joined the ranks of "the tyranny of the minority." I am not a warrior; rather, I am a peaceful secularist. Yet, when tyranny becomes intolerable, I believe that the time has come to stand up and speak against it. I did what I consider to be my duty.

Having spent some twenty years in Africa and the same length of time in Europe, and having now chosen Canada, Dagmar Gontard-Zelinkova likes to call herself a citizen of the world. Having witnessed the holocaust and the genocide made her aware of the dark side of humanity, while strengthening her determination to join all the fights on "the road to reason." A lover of nature and animals, Dagmar now lives on a wooded property on Lake Baptiste.

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