

Sunday shopping

METANOIA

With John Valk (Campus Ministry)

Before Christmas a few stores in New Brunswick defied a long-standing law by opening their doors for shopping on Sunday. Alas, the issue that has caused great public concern and debate in Alberta, Ontario, Maine and elsewhere is about to erupt in this province. What are New Brunswickers to do with Sunday shopping?

The Ontario Supreme Court on June 22, 1990 struck down as unconstitutional the law forbidding store openings on Sunday in that province. This apparently was a surprise to most everyone, including the retailers. In this ruling Judge Southey noted that recent poll findings indicated that 54% of Ontario residents favoured Sunday shopping. Further, and more to the point, he felt that the current law violated the rights of workers. That was sufficient in his eyes to strike down the existing law. And so Ontario may soon be enroute to joining other places which favour consumption with pause. Does New Brunswick wish to follow suit?

If I have it right, the arguments for Sunday shopping go something like this. One, the current law forbidding shopping on this

day discriminates against those who do not observe Sunday as a religious holiday. Two, it violates the rights of retailers who seek to protect their market share and competitiveness. Three, it discriminates against shoppers who wish to spend their money seven days a week. Let us consider some of these. I will begin this week and conclude next week.

It is quite true that for those who are not of the Christian faith, eg. Jews, Muslims, Hindus, etc., this law can be discriminating. That is particularly the case for the observants of the Jewish faith, whose Sabbath is Saturday rather than Sunday. One would think that a fair and just law for religious minorities who close their stores on other days of the week for religious reasons would permit some concessions for them on Sundays.

What about those who do not belong to these religious minorities? Some opponents of the current law argue that Christian churches are merely exercising what remaining public muscle they have to reinforce laws that no longer hold for a modern secular society. Since many people today claim they are no longer religious, the whims of the Christian

churches should no longer be forced upon them.

Such an argument is not well founded. It is a fallacy to argue that one is not religious. Oh, one may not go to church, but that does not mean that one is not religious. People are religious by virtue of their being human. Religion is essentially what separates humans from animals.

What is religion then? All humans experience or seek meaning and value in life. When we speak about or concern ourselves with ultimate meaning and value we enter the religious realm. What we experience or seek ultimately to fulfill or satisfy our yearnings, to the extent that it can, becomes our religious motive or object. And, we have many religious motives or objects, the least not being God (Allah, Yahweh, etc). But, materialism, humanism, hedonism, economism, militarism also have religious overtones. They indicate what we hold to be ultimate, or at least highly important.

Perhaps we are not accustomed to thinking of religion in this way. Mostly we think of religion in terms of church, clergy and Sunday worship. And, many have

chosen not to identify or associate with these. But, that does not mean they are not religious.

Worse still, many tend to compartmentalize their religion or religious activity. Religion then becomes their own private affair, which they tend to keep to themselves and to Sundays. From Monday to Saturday they engage in weekly affairs, and their religion impinges on these affairs, if at all, only in terms of keeping them somewhat honest, moral and decent. Such a life orientation is dualistic; there is a dual allegiance. Sunday is reserved for worshipping or reflecting on God. During the week other ultimate motives enter the picture. The sad thing is many are frequently either unconscious or uncritical of these other motives.

That type of orientation or outlook is secular. But, it is also religious. This is important to note because what motivates our society during the week, namely the buying and selling of goods and services, now threatens to encroach on the one day that traditionally was free from it. As Christian consciousness wanes, other (religious) forces or motives (eg. materialism, economism)

become more dominant and all-absorbing.

Up until the recent past Sunday has been the day set aside for rest from weekly commercial activity. Granted, that was modelled after the Judaeo-Christian view of the need to set aside one day for rest, re-creation and reflection. What happens if we eliminate such a day? What kind of people do we become if we in society cannot cease our commercial activity one day in seven? Is it not an admission that our commercial activity has in effect come to determine, even shape, who and what we are as humans? Does our ultimate motive (our god) not become one of consumption, to which we must devote time, energy and money seven days a week, with the shopping malls the great cathedrals of worship?

Undoubtedly, some stand to gain from Sunday shopping. But there is a larger price to be paid. One may not accept the above religious argument, but one must at least pay heed to other perhaps more practical consequences.

Continued next week.

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