

SPECTRUM

First Nations' View

Church, state, religion, and pluralism

OPINION/ *There is a great deal of difference between extending special privilege to one particular church and treating all churches equally.*

by John Valk

Embedded in the Canadian and American Constitutions is the notion of separation of church and state. The state is to give no special privilege to any one institutional church. According to Mr. Jamie van Raalte (Opinion, 5 Feb.) this is a good thing. I agree.

There is, however, a great deal of difference between extending special privilege to one particular church and treating all churches equally. Furthermore, there is a great deal of difference between not wishing to extend special privileges to any one religious group, and ignoring or purposely excluding all religions or religious considerations. That the Student Union wishes to avoid extending special privilege to any one religious group is praiseworthy. That it seeks to ignore or purposely exclude all is not. To understand the difference we need to be fully aware of the meaning of religion and secularism.

Many who argue for the separation of church and state sometimes confuse church and religion. There is, however, a great deal of difference between the two. They are not synonymous. No doubt religion is expressed in the institutional church, but there is also much religion expressed outside of it. Church attendees are not the only people who are religious.

According to Webster's New International Dictionary religion is defined as "that which one holds to be of ultimate importance." Is it not

correct to assume then that every one holds "something" to be of ultimate importance? For some (many?) this may be God. But for others it may be the car they fancy, the beer they consume, the sports they (vicariously) participate in, the material goods they seek, or the power for which they strive. What ever consumes our time, energy and money quickly reveals what is of ultimate importance in our lives. Everyone is religious, even the "couch potato."

Secularism, on the other hand, is defined as "a view or way of life or any particular matter based on the premise that religion and religious considerations should be ignored or purposely excluded." Secularism acknowledges that people may have religious beliefs, but these are to remain private and may not enter the public forum.

There are, no doubt, those who feel that religious beliefs are "a very personal and private decision or commitment in which government has no business." I agree. Government has no business forcing any particular religious belief on its citizens. That includes secular beliefs. But to what extent is this not being done? Does our public educational system not (unwittingly) teach that religion is private and not important in the public realm? Is the Student Union perpetuating this secular notion by excluding religious groups from those which it funds? Is it then not itself adopting a certain religious position?

Canada is not a homogeneous society. Canadians no longer share

a common belief; people hold different convictions about life and truth. Canada is a pluralistic society. Simply put, pluralism is a recognition that different people have different beliefs and wish to live in different ways. Governments are to protect and facilitate their human right to do so. People's rights and the public interest are threatened when governments promote one view or way of life (secularism) and discourage others. Forcing, or subtly educating, all people to adopt a secular outlook, that is, keep their ultimate concerns private, violates democratic freedom.

There are many who assert, myself included, that religious beliefs or ultimate concerns cannot be excluded, even if attempted. What we feel to be of ultimate importance constantly impinges on our decision making. One cannot check

these concerns at the door when entering the public forum.

When the Student Union makes decisions regarding the distribution of funds entrusted to it by students, it invariably decides what is of importance to student life at university. But why is not religion or religious groups important? Why is what they do of a nature so significantly different (or detrimental?) that they do not merit funding? And remember, it is not difficult to adopt policy guidelines to ensure that what is done with funds results in constructive, positive and life-affirming activities. That, I would assume, is done with all other groups.

The responsibility of the state is to ensure that justice prevails within its borders and that all citizens have equal opportunity to pursue their economic, social and spiritual well-

being. The Preamble to our Canadian Constitution includes an important reference: "We affirm that our country is founded upon principles that acknowledge the supremacy of God. ... We recognize that we remain free only when freedom is founded on respect for moral and spiritual values."

"Moral and spiritual values" do impact the public forum. Witness the controversies surrounding abortion, gambling, pornography, etc. But whose values win the day? Governments should not ever again embrace one particular view of life. The secular belief, that religion belongs solely in the private realm, is unfortunately gaining much ground. The more that happens, the more we relinquish our freedom. Is the Student Union, in its reluctance to fund religious groups, unwittingly heading in that direction?

Amnesty International Youth/Campus Network

Human rights abuses

MANDATES/ *They are based on the principles of human rights proclaimed by the UN and other intergovernmental bodies.*

by Kourosh Mohseni

In the next four articles we will look at the four major Policy Mandates of Amnesty International. This week I would like to define the concept of "Prisoner of Conscience".

Amnesty International works to prevent the violation of human rights. One of its main roles is the human rights education. Here we are dealing with four major human rights violations happening in almost every country in the world.

Amnesty works to:

1. Free all prisoners of conscience. People who are detained anywhere for their beliefs or because of their ethnic origin, sex, colour or language who have not used or advocated violence;
2. Ensure fair and prompt trials for political prisoners;
3. Abolish the death penalty, torture and other cruel treatment of prisoners;
4. End the extrajudicial executions and "disappearances".

The main theme of these mandates are based on the principles of human rights proclaimed by United Nations and other intergovernmental bodies. Though these international standards define the rights of individuals on one hand and the obligations of governments to their citizens on the other hand, we still live in a world that human rights is extremely under attack by most countries. Amnesty is one of the organizations that acts like "Amnesty is watching the big brother!" There are a lot of governments or institutions in the world that have dedicated themselves to crush the human spirit. Through the 4 major

principles presented above, Amnesty ensures that all around the world there are enough AI members to watch the governments and to ensure that their citizens are protected by the human rights standards enforced by international law. As amended by the 20th International Council, met in Yokohama, Japan (31 August - 7 September 1991); AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL adopts its first mandate:

"To promote awareness of and adherence to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other internationally recognized Human

religious or other conscientiously held beliefs or by reason of his or her ethnic origin, sex, color or language, provided that he or she has not used or advocated violence (hereinafter referred to as 'PRISONERS OF CONSCIENCE'; AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL shall work towards the release of and shall provide assistance to prisoners of conscience."

Now the question is what methods does Amnesty use to enforce this mandate. The explanation for defending the rights of the prisoner of conscience, one who had not advocated violence is based on a statement prepared by a sub-committee established by its International Council in Vienna in 1973. The sub-committee was asked to consider the question of violence within Amnesty International's statute. Amnesty International, however neither encourages nor supports violence, what so ever. Amnesty International does not have contradictory resolutions like some other human rights organizations that meanwhile protecting one human society from violently invaded by another, enforcing its human rights principles using harsh militarism to stop the abuses. Such unresolved antagonistic contradiction does not apply to Amnesty International. One should always remember that Amnesty International's activities, determined by the specific nature of its objectives, contribution to human rights, a fact recognized by the Nobel Committee in 1977 when it awarded Amnesty International the first prize for peace.

Amnesty International, Group YC 405 has general meetings every 3 weeks in campus. Our meetings are open to the public. Everybody is welcome. The next meeting will be held in room #26 SUB on Sunday, February 14th at 7:00 pm.



Rights instruments, and the indivisibility and interdependence of all human rights and freedoms;

To oppose grave violations of the rights of every person freely to hold and to express his or her convictions and to be free from discrimination by reason of ethnic origin, sex, color or language, and of the right of every person to physical and mental integrity, and in particular to oppose by all appropriate means irrespective of political considerations: 1. The imprisonment, detention or other physical restrictions imposed on any person of his or her political, reli-

UNIVERSITY OF NEW BRUNSWICK

AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING

ATTENTION: STUDENTS AND FACULTY

THE AWARD is dedicated to the late Dr. Allan P. Stuart and is to honour persons who are representative of outstanding teaching achievement at the University of New Brunswick.

ELIGIBILITY: A candidate must teach at least one 3-credit hour undergraduate course, and at least one 3-credit hour course each term, during the academic year in which the nomination is made. It is not expected that the nominees should excel in all criteria listed on the nomination form, but they should be qualified in most categories. Individuals are not eligible if they have been previous recipients of the Award.

NOMINATION: Candidates for the Award are proposed and recommended to the Senate Committee on Quality of Teaching by students and faculty of the University.

The basic information required is contained on the Nomination Forms, which are available from the University Secretary, Fredericton; the Vice-President (Saint John); the Student Council, Saint John or Fredericton; and Faculty offices. No one may nominate or support more than one candidate. The form must be signed by two nominators. The Committee places little value on long lists of signatures supporting a nomination. However, signed letters or paragraphs of support from a variety of sources (current and former students, faculty members, Department/Division Chairs or Deans) can enhance a nomination.

Send nominations to the University Secretary, Room 110, Old Arts Building, UNB Fredericton, or to the Vice-President (Saint John), Room 110, Oland Hall, UNB Saint John.

ON OR BEFORE 4:00 P.M., ON FRIDAY, 12 MARCH 1993