

The Word, unheeded

MICHAEL ADAMS

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The debate over same-sex marriage occurs at a time when Canadians are realizing how quickly social values have evolved in this country -- and diverging from those of Americans. But the historical record shows that, for more than a century, we Canadians have refused to defer automatically to the admonitions of popes and bishops.

During the 1896 federal election campaign, Catholic priests in Quebec, on orders from their bishops, instructed parishioners to only vote for candidates who formally agreed to support legislation granting educational rights to Catholics in Manitoba. Liberal leader Wilfrid Laurier, a Catholic, refused to make such a promise. Archbishop Louis-François Laflèche told Quebeckers that voting for a party led by such a man would be "sinning in a grave manner." On election day, Laurier and his Liberals won 53.5 per cent of the popular vote and 49 of 65 seats in the province.

Now, more than a century later, another Catholic Prime Minister from Quebec has agreed to allow a free vote in the House of Commons on a law that would allow marital unions between people of the same sex. As in the 1890s, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, this time on orders from the Vatican, is advising its priests and laity to oppose Jean Chrétien's plan, and is explicitly instructing Catholic parliamentarians to vote against the bill. Bishop Fred Henry of Calgary has warned Mr. Chrétien that he risks eternal damnation if he continues on his present course. Ontario's senior bishop, Jean-Louis Plouffe, has also called on Catholic MPs to vote against the bill, and has said that Liberal leadership front-runner Paul Martin, a devout Catholic, would be betraying his religion if he voted to legalize same-sex marriage.

The Prime Minister's office has issued a statement on the necessary separation of church and state, affirming that Mr. Chrétien's primary responsibility is to serve the Canadian people, not his church. As for Mr. Martin, he says that his responsibilities as an MP require him to take a wider perspective than his religious faith. In the Chrétien/Martin era, it is no easier for religious authorities to influence the behaviour of their flocks than it was in Laurier's Canada. For decades, "good Catholics" have defied their church's prohibition on artificial birth control; in a 2000 Environics poll, 63 per cent of self-identified Roman Catholics agreed that "every woman who wants to have an abortion should be able to have one" -- in direct defiance of one of the Vatican's most vehement moral edicts.

Today, the majority of those Canadians who tell census takers they belong to a particular faith see nothing wrong with their questioning or rejecting altogether some of the tenets and behavioural prescriptions of that faith. As for Mr. Chrétien and Mr. Martin, the threat of eternal hellfire will likely have as little effect on their decisions as politicians, as it did on Sir Wilfrid nearly 11 decades ago.

However, politicians are more likely to listen to polls than priests. And polling this summer has detected a slight erosion in public support for the current same-sex legislation as debate over the issue has intensified. Respondents are now split, 49 per cent for, and 49 per cent against. Polls find one-third or more of Canadians in strong opposition (some of these people could tolerate civil unions, as long as "marriage" was left to the preserve of the heterosexuals).

Some politicians may be tempted to vote against same-sex marriage, thinking that it may be more of a vote-determining "wedge issue" for strong opponents of the legislation than for its supporters. They may also believe that in any case, the courts will continue to interpret the Charter of Rights and Freedoms so as to ensure homosexuals the right to marry -- similar to the way in which parliamentary inaction led to the decriminalization of abortion.

Still, there is no doubting the decline of conventional religious belief and practice in Canada. Three in five Canadians reported that they attended church regularly in the mid 1950s; now that's just one in five. In this, Canadian attitudes have been diverging from American views for the past half century, as I document in my new book *Fire and Ice: The United States, Canada and the Myth of Converging Values*. American religiosity has remained constant (and high) at least since the mid-1930s, when pioneering U.S. pollster George Gallup first began interviewing random samples of his fellow citizens on the subject. About 45 per cent of Americans reported attending a religious service each week in the mid-1930s and that figure has not altered significantly to this day. A Pew/Environics research poll conducted in 2002 found that religion is important to 59 per cent of Americans but only 30 per cent of Canadians.

More significantly, the nature of the religiosity of Canadians and Americans has diverged over the decades. Environics research finds about 33 per cent of Americans (representing 43 per cent of Christians) to be fundamentalist in orientation, that is, believing in the literal interpretation of the Bible. The figure in Canada is only 14 per cent (representing 20 per cent of Christians in the country). The evolution of Canadian Christianity to a more liberal, open, inclusive and less judgmental spiritual quest contrasts with the more conservative, closed, and dogmatic orientation south of the border. Canada's values orientation has tended toward "both/and" while in the United States, it's more "either/or."

The country's largest Protestant denomination, the United Church, for example, affirms that gays and lesbians are eligible to be ministers, that local congregations can bless same-sex relationships, and since 2000, has advocated civil recognition of same-sex unions -- a stance that would be viewed as radically, even dangerously, liberal by churches south of the border. Just yesterday, the United Church's General Council meeting passed a motion calling on Ottawa to allow same-sex marriages -- after only 45 minutes of debate.

These divergent religious and moral attitudes are reflected in the changing orientation to other traditional institutions and authorities, including that most familiar of authority figures -- dad.

Canadians have brought their questioning of traditional authority right into the home and are far less likely than Americans to agree with the statement: "The father of the family must be master in his own home." A 1992 Environics poll found that 26 per cent of Canadians believed that

"father must be master" (down from 42 per cent in 1983). That same year, 42 per cent of Americans told us dad should be on top.

Since then, the gap has widened: down to 18 per cent in Canada in 2000, and up to 49 per cent in the U.S. in that year. As Canadians become ever less deferential to patriarchal authority, Americans are becoming more and more willing to see if dad says it's okay to watch *The Simpsons*.

Quebeckers are the North Americans least likely to think that father should be master (15 per cent). In more conservative Alberta, the figure is 21 per cent, the highest in Canada. In the United States, the proportion supporting traditional patriarchy ranges from a low of 29 per cent in liberal New England, to a high of 71 per cent in the Deep South. Religiosity and deference to patriarchal authority reinforce each other.

In this context, it is no surprise that a June Environics poll found that 53 per cent of all Canadians (including 64 per cent of Quebeckers who say they are Roman Catholics) support allowing same-sex couples to marry.

Meanwhile, south of the border, same-sex marriage has been condemned by U.S. President George W. Bush. He recently stated, "I believe that marriage is between a man and a woman and I think we ought to codify that," adding that "I am mindful that we're all sinners," a statement sure to resonate with the Christian fundamentalists in that country who are an important component of his electoral coalition. This week, a *Washington Post* poll reported that a strong majority -- 60 per cent -- of Americans disapproved of the Episcopal Church's decision to bless same-sex unions. Opposition was strongest among those who attended church regularly.

Recall, too, that the U.S. Supreme Court has just overturned the anti-sodomy laws in the President's home state of Texas. This move comes a generation later than it did in Canada. (In 1968, the country's Parliament fell officially silent on sodomy during the term of then-justice minister Pierre Trudeau, a Roman Catholic from Quebec, who stated: "The state has no place in the bedrooms of the nation.")

The U.S. Supreme Court may be forcing George Bush to cede a little territory in the bedrooms of his nation. But given the high and rising levels of deference to patriarchal and religious authority in the United States, Mr. Bush's fatherly "my house, my rules" statement will undoubtedly serve to retard any official moves to sanction same-sex unions in the United States.

In the meantime, gay and politically progressive Americans will slink back to their rooms like defeated teenagers, to crank up the Dixie Chicks and await the next election. And Canadians -- Catholic and otherwise -- will keep going their own way.

Michael Adams is the president of the Environics group of companies, and author of *Fire and Ice: The United States, Canada and The Myth of Converging Values*, published by Penguin.