Pluralism, Political Creeds, and Competing Ontologies: Faith Leaders as a Resource for Navigating Polarization

Bruce J. Clemenger

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What are the sources of our public principles and procedures by which we organize our political life together? Around what do we as members of the Canadian political community cohere across religious and cultural differences? How do we handle substantive disagreements about law and public policy? What is the role religious leaders, and their communities, can play in fostering civility and collaboration for the public good?

The promise of political liberalism as articulated by authors such as John Rawls and Charles Taylor is that it will facilitate peaceful coexistence within the context of a religiously plural society, one marked by people and communities that adhere to a diversity of religions or systems of belief and cultural traditions. They contend that political liberalism best enables individuals to pursue their own understanding of human flourishing—as individuals or in community.

Critical to this liberal project is the identification of political principles (what I will call the political creed) that are shared by citizens who are adherents of various religious and secular traditions; the need to identify, sustain, and cultivate these shared principles; and how these principles can influence the inevitable political debates that occur when legislating on matters on which adherents of different religious and secular traditions deeply disagree. In these tasks, religious leaders and their communities can play an important role.

The Political Creed

Critical to this project of political liberalism is the identification and affirmation by citizens and governments of principles and procedures that will guide our living together that are not rooted in any one comprehensive doctrine, as John Rawls called them.[3] The state cannot be neutral in a strict sense as some basic principles will need to be identified and adhered to.[4] A "liberal" state will protect the freedom of individuals to pursue alone, or in community and through associations, their respective visions of human flourishing in so far as this is compatible with the like freedom of others.[5] The task of a liberal society

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[2] Bruce Clemenger is Senior Ambassador, President Emeritus, The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada.

[3] See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia, 1996), p. xviii.

[4] Justice Deschamps of the Supreme Court of Canada, writing for the majority in a case involving education about religion, acknowledged the impossibility of absolute state neutrality. She wrote: "We must also accept that, from a philosophical standpoint, absolute neutrality does not exist … Therefore, following a realistic and non-absolutist approach, state neutrality is assured when the state neither favours nor hinders any particular religious belief, that is, when it shows respect for all postures towards religion, including that of having no religious beliefs whatsoever, while taking into account the competing constitutional rights of the individuals affected." S.L. v. Commission Scolaire Des Chênes [2012] 1 S.C.R., 252, 253.

[5] Within liberal political thought, there is an ongoing debate about the relation of the state to communities and associations that exist in its jurisdiction and whether, and to what extent, rights and freedoms guaranteed to

characterized by deep religious and cultural differences is to establish a political creed—an agreed-upon set of principles and procedures—to which all citizens can subscribe from out of their respective world views. This political creed will be an expression of an "overlapping consensus," as Rawls called it, a consensus that is it non-sectarian in that it is not embedded in any one comprehensive doctrine but can be affirmed by adherents to a variety of doctrines.[6] The political creed will be as broad and deep as the consensus permits. In the language of Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor, the goal is an "open secularism" or a "liberal pluralist" approach within which no one doctrine, religious or secular, can be solely relied upon for justifying state action without jeopardizing the freedom or equality of individuals.[7] They contrast this with a republican model that is more hostile to the public expression of religious doctrines which are seen to be inhibitors to individual emancipation and social integration.[8]

It is my premise that a key factor in the rise of polarization in Canada is that governments and institutions in some of their policies are seen to be increasingly sectarian and dismissive or intolerant of dissenting views. They are not seen by all to be fair, accommodating, and respecting of deep differences, particularly of those rooted in religious comprehensive doctrines.

Tolerance is vital in a religiously and culturally plural society. Toleration involves two conditions; that you disagree with certain convictions or practices, and that you also have a degree of control or power over the convictions or practices (such as the ability to censor convictions or curtail practices). This second condition enjoins forbearance. It means to be patient, self-controlled, and showing restraint.[9] The expectation of moving beyond tolerance to a celebration of moral, religious, ideological difference eliminates the need for genuine toleration by presuming that moral, ideological, and religious differences are inconsequential. To contend this is true is not neutral.

Tolerance is vital in a deeply plural society. We exhibit tolerance out of our conviction that not all beliefs and practices can be collectively affirmed or celebrated. We affirm the religious freedom of all, and yet we also believe certain convictions are true and some

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individuals should be extended to communities and associations. Victor M Muniz-Fraticelli' in part 1 of his *The Structure of Pluralis*m (Oxford, 2014) provides an overview of this debate.

[6] *Political Liberalism* pp. 133ff. While borrowing the term from Rawls, I prefer Charles Taylor's interpretation of the term. Note the consensus is on the principles of what I call the political creed and that this approach recognizes that "everyone who adheres to it will have some broader and deeper understanding of the good in which it is embedded." See Taylor's "Modes of Secularism," *Secularism and its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava (Delhi: Oxford University Press,1998), p.38. As I will argue below, when determining the meaning of these principles in their application, the various conceptions of the good out of which citizens affirm these principles should be respected if the consensus is to be sustained.

[7] In their book *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* (Harvard, 2011) Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor note that what they call the "liberal pluralist" model has been called by others "open secularism". They write, "An open secularism recognizes the needs to be neutral—laws and public institutions must not favour any religion or comprehensive secular view—but also acknowledges the importance that the spiritual dimension of existence holds for some people, and as a result, the importance of protecting individual's freedom of conscience." p. 58.

[8] *Ibid*., pp. 36–40.

[9] See Bruce J. Clemenger, "Tolerance and Dialogue: Setting the table for conversations about life and faith," *Faith Today* (March/April 2023). Tolerance should not be confused with indifference or acquiescence. Indifference is not toleration because the element of disagreement is absent. Acquiescence is not toleration as you lack the power to influence the behaviour.

practices better reflect these convictions than others. Practising tolerance is premised on the rejection of moral, ideological, and religious relativism.

Is the rise of intolerance and of polarization in Canadian politics in part animated by a shift from a liberal pluralist model to a more sectarian republican liberalism, a liberalism which marginalizes the public engagement of religion and seeks its privatization?[10]

In order to accommodate the greatest range of religious or ideological diversity while maintaining peaceful coexistence, the political creed needs to be broadly shared amidst this diversity. The creed will identify principles and procedures that are affirmed by adherents of a variety of comprehensive doctrines. An example of this consensus would be the affirmation of basic human rights. Most comprehensive doctrines such as the major world religions and secular belief systems affirm the dignity of the human person and, by extension, the importance of ensuring basic human rights. An illustration of this is a 1948 volume with an introduction by Jacques Maritain which contains papers presented at a symposium hosted by UNESCO in which participants from out of a variety of religious and secular traditions affirm their support for the idea of human rights.[11]

In their vision of a liberal pluralist approach, Maclure and Taylor propose mutual respect and freedom of conscience as two fundamental principles to sustaining a liberal pluralist society. They believe that citizens, regardless of their respective religion or belief system, will acknowledge that these two are necessary to a functioning democracy in societies of deep religious and cultural diversity.[12]

While they do not explore other principles which they might also include, they do warn of the consequences of adding principles that will undermine a liberal pluralist approach. Two they explore are individual emancipation and civic integration. Regarding the former they write, "A secular model may seek to promote the emancipation of individuals from religion and, therefore, the secularization or erosion of religious belief, or it may wish to consign religious practice strictly to the confines of private and associative life. To varying degrees, that conception of secularism defends a negative opinion about religion itself, seen to be incompatible with an individual's rational autonomy."[13] They say that this more restrictive understanding of secularism would advance the second principle of integration understood as a "sense of allegiance to a common civic identity and the collective pursuit of the common good."[14] Pursing these will press the state in a more sectarian or "republican" direction.[15] It will ostracize some citizens from the political creed and fragment the

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[10] For a more complete analysis of this shift, see part 2 of my book titled "The Emerging Public Orthodoxy: Liberalism, the Charter and Individual Autonomy" in *The New Orthodoxy: Canada's Emerging Civil Religion* (Castle Quay, 2022).

[11] *Human Rights: Comments and Interpretations*. (New York: Allan Wingate, 1949).

[12] They do not say these are the only principles that are required. Neither do they discuss the role of constitutional documents such as the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, though the *Charter* does include freedom of conscience as one of the guaranteed freedoms in section 2. Perhaps principles such as mutual respect and freedom of conscience are better understood as underlying or framing principles, what the courts refer to as charter values, which are used to interpret and apply the provisions of the *Charter*. As I note below, the challenge is the theses values are nowhere delineated or defined.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 31.

[15] As they describe it, "The republican model attributes to secularism the mission of favouring, in addition to respect for moral equality and freedom of conscience, the emancipation of individuals and the growth of a common civic

consensus among citizens. Doing so will foster polarization in a society of deep pluralism. The political creed will no longer be a source of cohesion for the political community, nor will it be able to serve as a common basis for settling disputes.

If a state's purpose is individual emancipation, then emancipation from what and to what? Emancipation from history, tradition, culture, dogma, religion, biology? In the pursuit of what; individual autonomy, the authentic self, the unencumbered self? The answer requires the invocation of a specific understanding of human flourishing which will not be shared by all who would affirm the core principles of a liberal pluralist state. And, if we agree it is the state's tasks to foster cohesion, around what will we coalesce? Race, ethnicity, language, tradition, shared history, values? If values, what values will be added to basic notions of freedom of conscience and equal respect that will be broadly shared in a society of deep pluralism? Who will identify, define, and apply these?[16]

For example, individual autonomy is nowhere mentioned in the *Charter* or in human right codes, but it is increasingly invoked by politicians and by courts.[17] At a symposium titled *End of Life, Equality and Disability* held in Ottawa in January 2020, Minster Carla Qualtrough said, "Personal autonomy is a sacred right, a sacred choice to be able to make the choices for yourself, about yourself, and the life you choose to live."[18] At the same symposium the then Justice Minister David Lametti said the task of government "is allowing people to flourish and live in a way they want to live, choose to live, and in order to make autonomy a real and robust concept." If autonomy is a sacred right, any barrier to the expression of my individual autonomy must be suppressed or eradicated, and any challenge to the sovereign expression of my autonomy is blasphemy. The public advocacy of another anthropology would be understood as heresy.[19]

Is making autonomy a real and robust concept now the task of the state? In the liberalism promoted by Maclure and Taylor, their advocacy of mutual respect and freedom of conscience are critical to affirming and promoting the freedom of individuals as well as communities and associations to pursue their respective understanding of the good life and human flourishing. The principles of mutual respect and freedom of conscience are the conditions for fostering these pursuits. The adoption and promotion of a more radical understanding of autonomy, one that advances the liberation of individuals from dictates originating outside the self, such as tradition, revelation or religious dogma, is incompatible

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identity, which requires marginalizing religious affiliations and forcing them back into the private sphere. The liberal pluralist model, by contrast, sees secularism as a mode of governance whose function is to find the optimum balance between respect for moral equality and respect for freedom of conscience… The aim of liberal pluralist secularism is the optimal reconciliation of equality of respect and freedom of conscience." *Ibid.*, p. 34.

[16] *The Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Charter)* was broadly accepted by Canadians as a statement of basic rights and freedoms. However, courts increasingly refer to "charter values" as an interpretive frame within which to interpret and apply the rights and freedoms, and often these values or their relative weight are in dispute.

[17] For example, in its 2015 Carter decision, the Supreme Court framed the issue in terms of the "competing values" of autonomy and dignity, and the sanctity of human life and protecting the vulnerable. *Carter v. Canada* [2015] 1 R.C.S., p. 243.

[18] Remarks were made at a symposium titled "End of Life, Equality and Disability: A National Forum on Medical Assistance in Dying," held in Ottawa, Jan 30, 2020. It was sponsored by the Canadian Association of Community Living and the Council of Canadians with Disabilities. At the time she was Minister of Employment, Workforce Development, and Disability Inclusion.

[19] Conscience itself can be understood as a challenge to autonomy. What is conscience but the ability to follow the dictates of the inner voice, perhaps formed by religious belief? What is individual autonomy but to be liberated from these dictates?

with many of the comprehensive doctrines to which many in a religiously plural society adhere. How is this understanding of human autonomy to be reconciled with belief in a transcendent order? Rather than respecting the various comprehensive doctrines that are constituent of a pluralist liberal society, is the task of the state to marginalize or privatize religion, and weaken an individual's commitment to religion, in public schools for example, through the valorization of choice?[20]

Navigating Competing Social Ontologies

As noted above, liberalism as a political system is not philosophically neutral and the principles articulated in a political creed as described above are not freestanding or detached. While the principles identified in a creed will be grounded in a variety of comprehensive doctrines, the principles themselves can still be shared at a political level and the resulting consensus can provide a basis for a liberal pluralist society. The maintenance of the consensus requires vigilance in ensuring amendments or changes to the political creed do not undermine the consensus necessary to sustaining a liberal pluralist society.

Adding human emancipation as described by Maclure and Taylor into the political creed will cause the creed to become sectarian as it requires a commitment to a certain understanding of human flourishing which will be rooted in a social ontology that conflicts with the ontologies of other belief systems adhered to in a pluralist society. Social ontologies shape the social interpretations of the institutions and relationships that make up the social world. They determine the moral status of living beings and groups.[21] As Cecile Laborde points out, political principles like freedom and equality alone "cannot settle the prior question of the ontological and moral status of living beings," or of groups. Resolving these and other issues," she says, rests on "contested ontologies."[22]

On issues like abortion, euthanasia, the definition of marriage and prostitution, the laws governments enact will take sides among contested social ontologies. Does individual autonomy trump the societal commitment to the sanctity of human life? How will marriage be defined? What does protecting human dignity require? When does human personhood begin?

In Canada the Supreme Court did not say marriage must be redefined, it did not find a right to abortion, and did not require that euthanasia be provided by governments. These were and are political decisions. Those who seek to argue these issues only in terms of the political creed, or as Laborde argues, freedom and equality, fail to grasp they are arguing

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[20] For William Galston liberalism is about the protection of diversity, not the "valorization of choice." He says A "value-pluralist" liberal state will respect autonomy but not promote it. See his book, *Liberal Pluralism* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[21] Critics of political liberalism challenge its ability or that of its variants (such as the liberal pluralist or republican models) to confine itself to the political realm and contend that it is itself a manifestation of an individualist ontology shaped by the enlightenment and is comprehensive and incompatible with non-liberal comprehensive doctrines. It is beyond the scope of this paper to adequately unfold and respond to this substantive challenge. Being situated with in liberal society, my purpose in this paper it to explore whether the liberal pluralist model framed by a political creed that identifies principles shared by adherents of a variety of religious and secular traditions can provide a means for civil engagement on contentious issues shaped by competing social ontologies by drawing into the conversation the expertise of the traditions out of a commitment to mutual respect and understanding.

[22] Cecil Laborde, "Abortion, Marriage and Cognate Problems," *The American Journal of Jurisprudence*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (2018), pp. 33-48.

from out of an ontological frame.[23] While the political creed cannot settle these issues, it can serve as the lens through which these matters can be debated by providing a set of shared principles. In these debates it is also critical to probe and disclose the limits of the political creed and the importance of a focused dialogue on the competing ontologies at play.

However, embedding a particular social ontology into the political creed will make the creed sectarian and will thereby compromise the political creed. It will no longer be broadly shared by citizens. The prior overlapping consensus will be undermined as for some citizens adherence to the creed will conflict with their beliefs and the creed will no longer serve as a basis upon which all citizens can hold governments, and more broadly their fellow citizens, to account.

When the politicians decide on such issues like abortion and euthanasia, they are taking sides and entrenching a social ontology, a contested understanding of human flourishing, in the law. There is no neutral approach or solution. It is not that they should avoid these issues, but rather in these situations it is incumbent on politicians to acknowledge that their decisions will be grounded in, or give preference to, some ontology – a prior understanding of the good and of human flourishing.

An example: when Parliament changed its definition of marriage to two people it recognized that some Canadians believed marriage is the union of one woman and one man. The preamble of the legislation recognized that some people would dissent from the new definition and a provision was included in the statute to ensure those who held a different view of marriage would not be denied federal benefit or protection.

To retain legitimacy in the eyes of the dissenters, those who will disagree with the political decision, politicians must recognize these decisions are contested for reasons deeply rooted in a view of human flourishing or worldview and seek to accommodate the dissenters if possible, or at the very least refuse to demonize them. When debating these issues, will we remain civil and be able to have a conversation about principles like freedom of conscience and mutual respect and how they shape our debates and proposed solutions? Or, will we insist on shouting down the other in a winner takes all political battle?

The democratic dimension of living in a liberal democracy boils down to majority rule. Yet as Charles Taylor quipped, "the logic of democracy can become that of ethnic cleansing." We choose between "…either civilized co-existence of diverse groups or new forms of savagery."[24]

The liberal aspect of a liberal democracy involves a commitment to the guarantee of basic freedoms and rights against the will of the majority or the encroachment of the state. The role of what I am calling the political creed is to articulate these shared principles that guide and regulate our deliberations and our laws. Within the Canadian politics, its role is to articulate the "charter values" that judges and politicians invoke when making their decisions such as the principles that guide the interpretation and application of the *Charter*. The challenge we face in Canada is that these "charter values" are nowhere delineated or defined.

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[23] See Bruce J. Clemenger, "Rights and Responsibilities: Charting a healthy course in the deep waters of narcissism," *Faith Today* (Sept/Oct 2023).

[24] Taylor, "Modes of Secularism," *Secularism and its Critics*, p. 48.

Maclure and Taylor offer two possibilities. Are they correct in presuming these are necessary and will be broadly affirmed? Are there other principles that should be added to the list? In exploring the source of constitutional principles, Chief Justice McLachlin wrote:

> The contemporary concept of unwritten constitutional principles can be seen as a modern reincarnation of the ancient doctrines of natural law. Like those conceptions of justice, the identification of these principles seems to presuppose the existence of some kind of natural order. Unlike then, however, it does not fasten upon theology as the source of the unwritten principles that transcend the exercise of state power. It is derived from the history, values and culture of the nation, viewed in its historical context.[25]

When seeking to name and apply these unwritten constitutional principles, will the exploration and articulation of the principles respect the overlapping consensus of the various comprehensive doctrines adhered to by Canadians? Will the principles be shared or will they be too reflective of the prevailing social ontologies that shaped Canadian history and politics? If a consensus on basic principles is not achieved, polarization will increase, civility and respect for conscience will be eclipsed, and tolerance thwarted.

Role of Faith Leaders

I have written about political creeds, social ontologies, and understandings of human flourishing. Those of us who live life out of an integrated system of belief and practice that is often described as religious understand how creeds function, how ontology contextualizes the principles and norms, and the depth of cohesion (fraternity) borne out of a shared creed and ontology.

In our political advocacy in liberal democracies, we are not speaking to a presumed neutral state applying universal principles in the pursuit of a notion of justice forged apart from a vision of the good and human flourishing. Rather, we are speaking into the formation and interpretation of creeds, about contested ontologies and the measure of consensus that can be expected of people who adhere to a range of comprehensive doctrines. Debates about contested ontologies can be polarizing, but they need not be. Rather they can be opportunities to understand our neighbours and their aspirations, and through conversation seek to find common ground, shared principles and articulate what public justice entails.

One significant contribution religious leaders can make to these dialogues is as experts in matters of creeds, of ontologies, and the nature of fraternity. I believe that as a citizen and a member of religious community it is part of my task to press for justice, compassion, and protection for vulnerable persons, not just for me or my community alone but for all. I can also take the stance of an advisor or expert witness and can help political decision makers understand the confessional, ontological and creedal dimensions of the policies they are considering.

To the degree that liberal democracies function like (or think of themselves as) an overlapping consensus, we can encourage politicians to consider the linkages between comprehensive doctrines adhered to by citizens and the justification for political action they

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[25] Remarks of the Right Hon. Beverley McLachlin, P.C., given at the 2005 Lord Cooke Lecture in Wellington, New Zealand, December 1, 2005, as quoted in George Edgerton in a paper titled. "Beautiful Inventions (And some not so beautiful)," presented on June 8, 2006.

offer. Doing so would show respect for diversity and foster understanding, and thereby diffuse a sense of marginalization among those who feel their concerns are being ignored, or that their views are being used as political fodder in a partisan and sectarian endeavour.

Both as advocate and advisor, we can contribute to a more complete understanding of the polarization and tensions, to disclose the various dimensions at the root of the disputations, and to offer approaches or solutions: promoting a vision of a society in which people of different creeds can live peaceably, can form communities rooted in their faith, live according to their beliefs, and contribute with others to the public good. This public expression of their faith will be a witness to others and a truly open society will afford spaces for dialogue about the pursuit of the truth.

While we can function as advocates and advisors, our witness is also to model dignity, respect, reconciliation, and peacemaking. The posture of irenic constructive engagement and the pursuit of justice not only creates the context for influence in the formation of public policy, but it also models the tolerance, civility and the desire for collaboration that are critical to the functioning of an open pluralism and fostering peaceful coexistence—which was the promise of a liberal democracy.