

Religion, politics need not be taboo subjects

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Many people of my generation were told by their parents that there are certain topics that are off-limits when you are talking to new friends or those you would like to keep as old friends. One of these off-limit topics is *politics* and another is *religion*. Perhaps our parents knew by experience that discussions about either of these topics may escalate into heated discussions and then progress to bitter arguments. Or they may have thought that, with these two topics, it is best to simply respect the rights of all people to hold whatever views they cherish and not interfere nor try to convert others.

During an election campaign in politics, and to a lesser extent in the everyday course of religion, Canadians tend to follow in the footsteps of USA traditions. Campaign advertisements can degenerate into nasty insults and sarcastic words used as put-downs rather than thoughtful arguments.

In religious discussions, it is not unusual to find a similar tone of disrespect concerning the religious choices of those with whom we disagree. It is unfortunate when terms such as stupid, narrow-minded, bigoted, wicked, evil, or heathen are used to describe those who think differently than we do. Whether these negative terms are directed to religious believers or non-believers, they are usually untrue and certainly unhelpful in communicating with those who do not share our own views. In fact, some of the harshest terms are used when fervent religious believers argue with other fervent believers who hold different religious views.

Over the years, I have come to believe that arguments over religion and politics are not such a bad approach, provided we can argue without anger and without personal verbal attacks. These can occasionally lead to violence and, in the worst cases, even to religious wars. Much of the animosity arising over religious and political disputes comes, not from too much discussion and civilized argument, but from too little.

Most of us are raised in the family values observed in our parents' lives. These include watching how parents treat each other, how they divide household tasks,

and which parent takes on certain roles in marriage. In short, it is not surprising that most children and young adults accept the political and religious ideologies of our parents.

I was raised in rather strict Presbyterian traditions, but my parents were divided in their political ideas; one firmly Liberal, the other firmly Conservative. When I became old enough to think about politics, I frequently listened to family arguments concerning the good and bad points about each of the two dominating political parties of the time. My parents' political arguments were never violent. To the contrary, they were respectful to each other, and their discussions were an incentive for me to listen to each side and eventually form opinions of my own.

In religious matters, both of my parents were definitely Presbyterian; so much so, in fact, that for a time I thought the only religion in Canada was Presbyterian. One day a Roman Catholic came to our farm to buy some wood for his furnace. As a pre-teenager at the time, I was gently warned that our visitor was different from us. He was a "Catholic." When my parents said the word "catholic" they whispered it in the tone one might use to report a dreaded disease or a wicked person. When he arrived, however, he proved to be friendly, happy, intelligent and civilized. Furthermore, my parents treated him with courtesy during the pleasant business transaction, and I was thus persuaded on this occasion, to begin to broaden my religious ideas.

Later in life, as I looked back on this early encounter, I concluded that exposure to friendly and civilized debates or arguments on religion, as on politics, could have been a way to expand and enrich my narrow perspectives.

Exposure to a wide variety of religious and non-religious beliefs, as well as going beyond long-standing political views historically held within Canada can increase and enlarge our understanding as well as enrich our perspectives. When religious and political arguments are carried on with civility and respect we can turn a win-lose situation into a win-win event.