

National Post

The J doesn't belong in CJC

Wednesday, March 29, 2000
Page: A17
Section: Editorials
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Source: National Post

It might sound odd that the Canadian Jewish Congress -- a group founded to defend and promote the practice of a religion -- has demanded that the Ontario government ban praying in its Legislature and town councils. Actually, it's not out of character for the CJC at all: Last summer it applauded when a human rights judge forbade the recitation of the Lord's Prayer in Saskatoon's public schools -- despite school prayer being guaranteed in that province's constitution. That judge ruled lectures on religion "should not include use of any prayer or readings from any form of Bible." The Good Book is the only book forbidden in Saskatchewan, and the People of the Book approved.

That irony, among others, was lost on Bernie Farber, the CJC's spokesman on prayer-banning. Mr. Farber welcomed the abolition of Saskatchewan's tradition of the Lord's Prayer because, he said, "it's archaic." That's true -- though it's not nearly as archaic as saying Jewish prayers, a practice that predates Christianity by centuries.

"It is time for the Bible Society to enter the 21st century" said Mr. Farber, inadvertently using Pope Gregory's calendar, "and realize Canada is not what it was 100 years ago." True again. Canada is certainly not as uniformly Christian as it was 100 years ago, but still most Canadians are Christian. And though Canada has generously absorbed millions of citizens from other faiths, our laws and culture have indisputably Christian roots. But if Mr. Farber is right -- if the omnipresent Christianity of 100 years ago no longer exists -- then why is a perfunctory recitation of a generic prayer a threat?

Why is the Christian Canada that was attractive to Jewish immigrants in the 1900s unacceptable in the 2000s? Despite Canada's history of missionary priests, despite the Christian God in our national anthem -- the French version of O Canada even mentions Christ's cross -- despite God's name in the first paragraph of our Constitution, despite St. John's and St. Maurice and the St. Lawrence River and a prime minister whose last name is French for Christian, Jews have flourished here. We are actually over-represented in the Lord's Prayer-reciting Ontario Legislature. Jews have succeeded in Canada not despite its Christian traditions, but because of them. Unlike pagan Nazi Germany or the atheist Soviet Union, Christianity imbued Canada with the rule of law, a belief in inalienable rights and tolerance.

A country with a Sikh premier, a Chinese governor-general and a Jewish deputy prime minister cannot fairly be chided for its lack of inclusivity. But by pressing harder, the CJC risks replacing its pro-Jewish past with an anti-Christian future.

Why did the CJC call for the elimination of the Lord's Prayer, instead of just adding a Jewish prayer where numbers warrant? Emma Langer, an 11-year-old complainant in the Saskatchewan case, told reporters she's "Jewish, but we don't practice too much." That fight wasn't about letting Ms. Langer say her Jewish prayers. It was about stopping the Christian children from saying theirs.

It's the same reason why the CJC went to court for Delwin Vriend, a gay teacher who was fired from a private Christian college for not living up to its moral code of conduct. That suit had nothing to do with promoting Judaism -- which forbids homosexual acts -- or protecting the interests of Jewish schools, which would have fired such a teacher, too. But it had everything to do with driving religion out of Canadian law.

No Jewish legislators have complained about the Lord's Prayer at Queen's Park; Delwin Vriend was not a Jew; and the little girl in Saskatoon admits she doesn't really practise Judaism anyway. These aren't Jewish causes. They are postmodern, post-religious causes, and that suits the increasingly post-Jewish CJC just fine. Which is too bad. Because by leading the fight to expunge religion from the public square, the CJC isn't protecting Jews, but actually undermining their interests.

The J doesn't belong in the CJC any more; indeed, its official list of issues sounds a lot like the Liberal Red Book, with campaigns for everything from aboriginal land claims to environmentalism to praise for the federal budget.

How can the CJC credibly call for public tax dollars to fund Bible-centred Jewish schools while it lobbies for an end to the Lord's Prayer in other public facilities? How can any ethnic group oppose public displays of Christianity and still demand public grants for its pet multicultural projects?

It is time for the CJC to show the same tolerance for Christianity that has been shown for Jewish prayer by our Gentile homeland.