

When faith takes up arms, silence is no option

By Henry Ergas, *The Australian*, 11 January 2016

Political correctness, says Pierre Manent in his new book on France and Islam, is “the language of those who are terrified about what would happen if they stopped lying”.

Convinced that after last year’s horrors, silence is no longer an option, Manent, who is one of Europe’s most eminent political philosophers, confronts the dilemmas his country faces with an honesty and intellectual rigour the Australian debate has largely lacked.

It is not that Manent is unaware of the risks that arise when emotionally charged issues are placed on the public agenda. As long ago as the 1570s, Jean Bodin, the great French theorist of sovereignty, argued that a wise ruler would gag controversies that threaten to unleash paralysing hostilities, all the more so if they involve disputes, such as those over religion, that are not rationally resolvable.

Allowing those controversies to rage could only weaken the state, Bodin said, as passions “maddened by reason” invariably become more stubborn, perpetuating the conflict itself and making every other problem more intractable.

The notion that some issues are best left off the table is therefore hardly a new one; but it can only work if those issues are genuinely private matters. And with Paris soaked in blood, it is clear that Islam, and its relation to terrorism, is not.

Religion draped in Kalashnikovs and suicide vests

Rather, when religion, draped in Kalashnikovs and suicide vests, shoots its way into the public square, trying to wish it away is as irresponsible as it is counter-productive.

That doesn’t mean the discussion can be easy or comfortable. “The unease”, Manent writes, “comes from the fact that we no longer know how to talk about faith as a social and political reality, rather than as an individual choice”. And compounding the difficulty, “it seems inconceivable to today’s ‘enlightened’ opinion that religion could motivate men and give them energy and direction as it did in the past”.

Nowhere is that truer than in western Europe, where the traditional Christian heritage is on the verge of collapse. As Michele Tribalat, the director of research at France’s national institute of demographic studies, shows in a recent book, the proportion of French Catholics who regard religion as of any importance in shaping their decisions has decreased in every generation since 1945; in contrast, a French Muslim born in the period from 1981 to 1990 is 1.3 times more likely to consider Islam as crucial in guiding daily life than his or her parents were.

As a result, the country which once prided itself on being the “eldest daughter of the Church” now has 150,000 more devout Muslims than devout Catholics among its 18- to 50-year-olds, despite Muslims accounting for barely 7.5 per cent of the population.

Merely the ravings of lunatics

And with 60 per cent of better educated French men and women saying they “hold no religious beliefs”, it is only natural that elite opinion would dismiss the religious claims of the terrorists

as merely the ravings of lunatics, while also insisting that their religion should, in a secular state, be immune from political debate.

Those assertions, Manent argues, are profoundly confused. A free society is “not one that gives equal respect to all opinions; it is one that gives equal respect to all persons, while treating every opinion as open to vigorous criticism”. But that is not how the self-proclaimed protectors of diversity view it: as is apparent from the abuse heaped on Catholics who reject gay marriage, their concept of freedom combines an unrestrained disrespect for their opponents’ beliefs with the contention that Islam should be a no-fly zone of the mind.

In demolishing that contention, Manent does not claim that Islam is a monolithic entity, any more than Christianity or Judaism are. But nor does he ignore the contradictions between Islam, as it really is in today’s world, and the culture and attitudes liberal societies take for granted.

Manent does not believe those contradictions necessarily make coexistence impossible; but it is foolish to think they can be solved simply by spending public money in a vain attempt to turn up the heat on the melting pot. Rather, they will persist until France’s Muslims learn to accept, not just in words but in deeds, the advice the prophet Jeremiah gave to the first Jewish exiles in Babylonia more than two millennia ago: “Seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away”.

A balance to be struck

There is no doubt a balance to be struck, as is made clear by the biblical injunction: “Do not oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” But a country is not a fellowship of strangers; it is a community whose glue comes from shared values. What we owe strangers is not freedom from our values, but the freedom to pursue them.

Yet Manent is realistic enough to know that an accommodation between France and its Muslims is unlikely to happen without a far-reaching reformation in Islam and in the Islamic world; and he also knows that there are few signs of any such reformation occurring.

Given that prospect, facing the future requires the honesty to set limits: for instance, by prohibiting theocracies such as Iran and Saudi Arabia from exporting into our democracies the venom of their fundamentalism. And it also requires an open discussion that allows problems to be aired, including those caused by the flood of refugees from North Africa and the Middle East.

There will, no doubt, be claims that open discussion encourages stigmatisation and promotes discord. But no society can afford to make conflict avoidance its highest goal, or allow the danger of injured sensitivities to trigger a ban on public debate. To do so would simply invite groups to threaten chaos so as to stifle criticism, while leaving the issues to fester.

Intransigence would be rewarded with immunity; at the same time, those whose concerns were being suppressed would become ever more resentful. Already now, rising support for the Front National is the price France is paying for decades spent pretending there was nothing to discuss.

Democracy is both better and more resilient than that. To gag is to choke; it is the ultimate sign of weakness. Yet the very word toleration derives from the Latin for strength: to stand up, support, and sustain. As Manent shows, it is the strength of frank discussion that we need, not the cowardice of silence.

