

“Limits to on-air televangelism”

[Published by the National Post as “Charles McVety cannot play the victim card”]

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In his article on the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council (CBSC)’s decision relating to Charles McVety’s *Word TV* show (“Evangelical TV show pulled from the air”, *National Post*, December 10, p. A6), Charles Lewis was tip-toeingly careful to present both sides of the issue. In so doing, he fell victim to McVety’s selective representation of his *Word TV* broadcasts and thus failed to underscore the societally problematic aspects of the host’s on-air comments.

The televangelist has been quick to protect his right to air his opinions, but actually no quicker than the CBSC has been. The CBSC of course supports freedom of expression, including the broadcast of opinions on controversial and sensitive subjects.

There are, however, limits in the form of standards developed over decades by the private broadcasters to ensure their collective support for the protection of the competing rights of the public. These include the right to accurate, unbiased and undistorted news, fair contests, the absence of adult fare during family broadcast hours, the avoidance of gratuitous violence, the absence of negative portrayal, unduly discriminatory or abusive comment, and so on.

When those rights come into conflict, it is the job of the CBSC Panels made up of equal numbers of public and industry representatives to sort out the societal interests. On the basis of recordings of the challenged broadcasts, and with the broadcast codes and the 487 previous CBSC decisions in hand, they sort out the wheat and the chaff.

In attempting to protect his territory following the CBSC decision, McVety has continued to be selective. He has picked the points that suit him and ignored or distorted those that do not. It’s an unfortunate style, but one that he gets away with, given the unavoidable freedom of inaccuracy and distortion on the internet.

For example, the CBSC decision was very careful to point out that there was *no problem* with the broadcast of McVety’s opposition to the new guidelines of the Ontario Ministry of Education for teaching tolerance and the acceptance of diversity, or his staunch position against the use of Government funding to support Gay Pride parades. He doesn’t refer to that.

But McVety's televised comments didn't end there. Not satisfied with his highly defensible statements on public policy issues, he tried to help his case by descending into distortion, inaccuracy, mischaracterization and abusive comment.

Could he not, for example, have staked out his opinionated perspective on human rights commissions without erroneously referring to the Alberta and Ontario bodies' records as "a one hundred per cent conviction rate"? Leaving aside discussion of the judgment-laden word "conviction", those statements are wildly inaccurate. Instead of basing his opinion on defensible grounds, he employed inaccurate information, weakened his argument, and breached the ethical broadcast standard that requires the "full, fair and proper presentation of ... opinion, editorial and comment."

And then he, again erroneously, asserted that, following the amendment to the hate provisions in the Criminal Code, "it is now a crime to *speak against* homosexuality. Yes, I said a crime." Those are his words. They constitute an absurd accusation. Crimes are serious matters in the Canadian justice system. It is only Keegstra-level genocidal advocacy or hatred incitement that are crimes, not religion-based or personally-motivated "statements" against the (for some) sinful nature of homosexuality or related issues such as same-sex marriage.

As to his characterization of the proposed, and ultimately withdrawn, revised Ontario curriculum as one designed to *teach* little children homosexuality, what need be said? The planned curricular revisions were clearly intended to teach *tolerance*, not how-to sexuality, as he alleged. McVety is entitled to disagree that such teaching of tolerance should be tolerated but his twisting of the *purpose* of the revisions is wrong-headed, unfair and improper.

While McVety may not like homosexuality, and that is his right, to leave the totally unsubstantiated and insupportable impression that gay and lesbian adults have a predilection toward sex with young, "underage people" is insidious and unacceptable.

McVety's selectivity, distortions and demagoguery do not aid the process. They infected many of the fourteen episodes reviewed by the CBSC Panel composed of public and industry adjudicators. And they continue to infect his defence of his breaches of broadcast standards and his criticism of the process. Too bad. The time has come for him to benefit from this assessment in the public interest and to move forward, not backward.