

Reformed Fundamentalists vs Vaccination

Correspondence with Douglas Todd¹

August 31, 2008

Douglas Todd

Though I often enjoy your materials, your article on the Dutch Reformed touches me personally and, frankly, annoys me greatly.

My chief complaint is your sloppiness.

1. What is the name of the denomination that refuses vaccination? Constant reference to “that tradition” is plain sloppiness. The denomination will have a name registered with the government, a specific name. Why did you not bother to find that out?

By your failure to identify them, you have cast a blanket of suspicion over all groups covered by the loose term “Dutch Reformed,” almost all of whom will be horrified to be identified with this kind of belief. The group you are talking about is so marginal among Dutch Reformed that I, a Reformed theologian and scholar of Dutch origin, do not even know the name of this group either here in BC or in The Netherlands.

2. You write, “Other denominations with roots in The Netherlands include the Christian Reformed and Reformed churches. Some of these do not officially oppose vaccination, although individual members might choose to do so.” Again sloppy work. I have no idea to which denomination “Reformed churches” refers to.

3. As to the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), the largest of them all in both Canada and BC, you cast suspicion over them as well by writing that it does “not officially oppose vaccination.” That is far too weak. I am not sure the issue has ever arisen in the official life of this century-old Canadian denomination, but if it has, it would have been strongly pro-vaccination. Its members “might” reject vaccination, you write. I do not know of a single member who would entertain such an attitude. If some member would reject vaccination, his local CRC leaders would do all they can to change his mind. If it were a case of a parent who refused to vaccinate a sick child, these leaders might well start disciplinary procedures against him for endangering the life of a child.

As a journalist responsible for the religious front, you can, usually do and should do better than that. You ought to know at least the names of the denominations in this province. Vague references to “that tradition,” failure to clearly identify, misrepresentation of official policy and false innuendoes about what members of certain churches “might” do is just too far below the bar.

¹ Douglas Todd is a columnist for the *VS*, whose articles I just about always read and just about always enjoy. Often they are challenging. For the distinction *New York Times* has awarded him, see below.

I have not even touched the innuendoes about Calvin. Without actually stating it, readers ignorant of John Calvin would almost certainly understand from your article that he would support opposition to vaccination. If I challenged you on that, could you give a knowledgeable answer? If not, why cast ignorant aspersion on one of the great theologians of the Church?

I am utterly surprised and offended at this kind of investigative reporting. What kind of prejudice are you trying to spread in this overheated hyper-secular province of ours?

John

September 2, 2008

Dear John,

Thank you for your concerned and thoughtful note.

We were faced with a dilemma as we pursued this story.

We were being criticized for quoting health officials as naming this group a "Christian" organization. That was said to tar all Christians.

Then when we narrow it down to people of the Dutch Reformed tradition, we are criticized for tarring all in the Dutch Reformed tradition.

We are not doing so, and the story makes it clear this is an ultra-orthodox arm of the Reformed tradition, which is highly diverse.

We contacted about 10 Reformed people, none of whom were willing to name the actual group, although they did say they knew it was an arm of the tradition. I don't understand this reluctance to be honest about the reality of this belief among some members. Specific is always better than general, in my thinking.

We are also following the lead of other journalists in other parts of the world, and of health authorities and researchers in other parts of the world, including Europe, in referring to this anti-vaccination stand as related to the Dutch Reformed or Reformed tradition. Those members of the Dutch Reformed tradition who refuse vaccinations tend to be present in many denominations within it.

I don't expect this will fully satisfy you, but I wanted to respond.

I think it might be helpful if you posted a version of your note as a "comment" on the blog. But it's entirely up to you.

Thanks again,
Doug

Dear readers: The New York Times has cited my blog as an "Editor's Selection." The blog is at www.vancouversun.com/thesearch

Douglas Todd
Spirituality and Philosophy
Vancouver Sun, 200 Granville St., Vancouver, B.C., V6C 3N3

=====

September 2, 2008

Dear Doug

Thanks for the time you took to respond. I will let it rest with this. Not out to draw blood!--pun intended.

Neither do I understand why people would not give the name of the church if they know it. Apart from the larger ones of CRC and "Reformed"--reference perhaps to the Reformed Church, which is the oldest Protestant denomination on the entire continent!--the rest are small splinter groups with more names than you can shake a stick at.

One item I should have added to my objection is that you avoided the question how these people came into the country to begin with. Immigrants, including myself, at least during the 50s, all had to be vaccinated against smallpox. I still have the scar on my upper left arm. If these people refused vaccination, how could the Canadian govt have allowed them in?

I have written you before and so you have more than once seen the info in the signature below. I am currently working on the last part of the last book of the series. Once I have it completed and it has been published, then I would like to invite you to do a review of the series. Give that some thought. I will remind you when the time is ready for it. I would be happy to send you even now a complimentary copy of the CD with the first 7 volumes if you're interested. If you want to see the books themselves, they are all in the Vancouver Public Library's central branch.

Well, keep up your good work and once again, thanks for your attention.

John Boer

=====

September 2, 2008

Trevor Vanderveen, my CRC pastor in Vancouver, joined the discussion as follows:

Hi John,

Thanks for highlighting this article. We stopped getting the Sun a few months ago to see how much we'd miss it, and at this point, I think I do.

I've just read the article and from that perspective of one who grew up in the Fraser Valley, I think Douglas Todd's article is correct. If I read him right, he is using 'ultra-conservative' as a label of a minor voice within the Reformed tradition, not as an adjective for all Reformed traditions. You might not have heard of the "Netherlands Reformed Church," but in Chilliwack it is one of the 6 fragmented Reformed denominations I can think of (Free Reformed, Protestant Reformed, United Reformed, Canadian Reformed, Christian Reformed to name the others...). In my experience in greenhouse construction, I regularly found myself talking with farmers who held these views and they were NOT open to discussion. I also read a tone of sympathy at the end of the article for these people who have been misled by their pastors into the great fear of God as a smiter.

I know this story kind of makes us CRCers guilty by association so I appreciate your desire to represent the majority view of Reformed Christians rather than Todd's focus on an 'ultra-conservative' group within our broader tradition.

Thanks again for highlighting this article.

Trevor

=====

September 3, 2008

Closing friendly comments from Todd:

Hi John,

Thanks for your three emails.

I look forward to receiving your book when it's ready. I can't promise a review -- I receive almost 40 books a month -- but I'd definitely like to see it.

I appreciate that you sent me Trevor's letter below. He's captured what I was trying to accomplish. I don't know what the reaction is to the articles in the wider Reform community.

Talk to you,

Doug