

# "I don't buy that..."

## The Values We Live By Today

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These are the scariest 1340 words I have ever written.

I am asked to discuss "the role media play in shaping our values." For me the discussion begins on two happy notes. First, it seems clear to me that we live in the most diverse society in human history. Our range of choices, experiences, pathways and styles is practically endless, both challenging and enriching us. And this diversity is available to us primarily because the media – that is, the print, broadcast, and web-based media – bring it directly into our lives, knitting us together as a "public" of greater scope than has ever existed in human history.[1] Second, it seems likely to me that historical consciousness is more widely exercised among us than it has ever been before. And I think that we are most fully human when we exercise historical consciousness.

On this second point I am influenced by my former teacher, Mircea Eliade, who discerned three modes of consciousness among human beings.[2] The base mode is mythic consciousness, best illustrated by the Australian aborigine's "dream time" in which one lives securely in an eternal now, and in which each human action is deeply rooted in a mythic universe that defines right and wrong, real and unreal. The second mode is historical consciousness in which the freedom to choose each action and to embrace each value is what makes us most human, but at the cost of being exposed to what Eliade calls "the terror of history" – the radical uncertainty that results from being a finite being who makes absolute choices. In the face of this terror, a human being requires what Protestant theologian Paul Tillich calls "the courage to be."[3] If the effort proves too exhausting – and all too often it does – then, Eliade argues, human beings willingly surrender the freedom of historical

consciousness to an ideological authority whose power rivals the mythic absolutes of the primitive's "dream time." This is the third mode of human consciousness. At their best religious traditions of all kinds invite human beings to share historical consciousness; at their worst they impose ideological straightjackets on people.

And here comes the part that scares me. In theory the media of our modern world are able to encourage and support historical consciousness, but in practice they tend to narrow and undermine the freedom necessary for historical consciousness.

On this point I find George Gerbner particularly persuasive. Professor of Telecommunication at Temple University, there is a delightful irony in the fact that he launches his critique of the mass media from the endowed security of the Bell Atlantic Chair.[4] He argues that the primary source of "stories" in the modern world is the mass media, and that "now stories are told by people with something to sell rather than something to tell."[5] The more accessible the mass media become, and the more scope they provide to us, the more economic pressure drives the mass media to narrow our human freedom. Individual human beings may be urged to bear up bravely under the "terror of history" but markets want to be insulated against catastrophic fluctuations. Forget the freedom of the market that weeds out bad performers! That is all very well in a market place where thousands of performers compete. In a globalized market place in which a few increasingly large conglomerates achieve dominance, competition is to be managed and tamed, not encouraged.

As electronic media become increasingly important and pervasive, the peril to our freedom increases as well.

I know that there are real differences between print media and electronic media as a source of public values – see, for example, the recent study of Canadian history by Gerald Friesen.[6] But for our purposes here the distinction means little because electronic media tempt the powers-that-be to manage the public for economic gain even more than print media do. As electronic media become increasingly important and pervasive, the peril to our freedom increases as well.

The relevance of this to religious life in modern Canada should be clear. "Stories" have always been the foundation of religious life – the first means by which we explored answers to the fundamental questions of "Who am I?" and "What ought I to do?", and the means to which we usually return when other, more sophisticated means prove shaky. In primitive society the storyteller met each of us face-to-face, and each of us was encouraged to develop our talent for storytelling. As technologies developed that permitted the stories to be preserved beyond the limits set by face-to-face transmission, we still tolerated and even expected a variety of stories. Consider, for example, the fact that the central story of the Christian community is mediated through no less than four gospels, and then further refracted every time a preacher passes it on orally to the flock.

But the modern world purchases power and scope for its stories at the expense of narrowing the opportunities to become a storyteller. Compare a Scoutmaster yarning to the boys around a campfire with Steven Spielberg spinning out nine episodes of *Star Wars*. Both storytellers are engaging the attention of those who are seeking resources with which to assemble an identity, a reliable framework within which to know who they are and what they ought to do. But with a little effort and a modicum of talent virtually anyone can become a Scoutmaster, while only someone capable of commanding an entire Hollywood studio and millions of dollars in backing can hope to produce *Star Wars*, surely one of the most influential stories of the modern world.

What is worse: we live in a day in which a Scoutmaster is easily tempted to gather the boys around a television while he feeds a tape of *Return of the Jedi* into the VCR.

I take cold comfort from the observation that my children's generation is growing up with a powerful inclination to scepticism and outright disbelief in the truth of what the mass media offer. Yes, it is empirically true that watching several hours of television every day leaves their generation unconvinced that the enthusiastic claims made by commercial advertisers are likely to be true. Their reaction to most commercials is, "I don't buy that." So we should not fear that the mass media will succeed in brainwashing the modern public. And that holds true, I think, even in totalitarian societies where the media are controlled by the state for political ends rather than by big private corporations for economic ends.

But it is tragically ironic that this tendency towards skepticism also disposes modern people to be intensely private at the expense of social bonds and goals.[7] The privatizing tendency of religious life in the modern world undermines the human search for meaning that is at the healthy heart of religious life. The danger is compounded by mass media that create the illusion of depth and engagement while in fact undermining them. Consider e-mail and chat rooms that encourage us to think that they are intimate even as they prune away the rough and tumble of physical presence. Consider the television personality who smoothly thanks us for "inviting me into your living room."

The power of the mass media to shape our values scares me, and their inclination to narrow our freedom so as to show a tidy profit offends me. Perhaps I should shun the mass media by refusing to submit this screed for publication. Yet I take some comfort in knowing that many who read it will turn up in the audience at the Congress on Monday, 2 June, ready to correct my errors and unlikely to feel any restraint about doing so. To the extent that this issue of the magazine encourages a broader public with a deeper historic consciousness, there is evidence that the mass media of the modern world may yet have a useful part to play in humanizing us.

But if you quit reading after the first line because you'd rather wait for the movie, then we're in more trouble than I thought.

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## Faulkner text – footnotes

1. By the noun "public" I mean in English what the ancient Romans referred to in their noun "publicum"—that is to say, an aggregation of human beings who never actually see each other face to face but are nonetheless expected to try to make decisions in common that could transform them into a community.
2. Cosmos and History. The myth of the eternal return Willard R. Trask, trans. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, Harper & Row, 1959)
3. New Haven : Yale University Press, 1952.
4. For a lucid summary and application of Gerbner's views see James Shanahan & Michael Morgan, Television and its Viewers. Cultivation theory & research (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
5. Television and its Viewers, p. 219.
6. Citizens and Nation: an essay on history, communication, and Canada (Toronto : University of Toronto Press, 2000).
7. See the argument in Thomas Luckmann, The Invisible Religion: the problem of religion in modern society (New York, Macmillan, 1967).

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1. Source: Valerie Knowles, Forging our Legacy, Canadian Citizenship and Immigration, 1900-1977, published by Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2000

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1. Voir les travaux de T.H MARSHALL, « Citizenship and Social Class » dans (1963) Sociology at the Crossroads and Other Essays, Londres, Heinemenn, p.67 - 127. Pour une critique, voir M. BULMER et A. M. REES, Citizenship today : The contemporary Relvance of T.H. Marshall, Bristol, University of California Press,1996. Voir aussi M. COUTU, «Introduction : droits fondamentaux et citoyenneté » dans M. COUTU, P. BOSSET, C. GENDRREAU, D. VILLENEUVE (dir),Droits fondamentaux et citoyenneté, Une citoyenneté fragmentée, limitée ou illusoire ? , Montréal, éditions Thémis, 2000, p. 1 - 20.
2. Voir P. GUIBENTIF, « Approaching the Production of Law through Habermas' Concept of Communicative Action" (1994) 20 Philosophy and Social Criticism, 45-70. à la p. 59.
3. Voir D. LEYDET, « Patriotisme constitutionnel et identité nationale » tel que cité dans M. COUTU, « Citoyenneté et légitimité. Le patriotisme constitutionnel comme fondement de la référence identitaire », à la p. 637.
4. En se situant ici dans une perspective sociologique et non juridique.
5. Voir G. BOURQUE et J. DUCHASTEL, L'identité fragmentée. Nations et citoyenneté dans les débats constitutionnels canadiens, Montréal, Fides, 1996.
6. cf. A.C. CAIRNS, "The Fragmentation of Canadian Citizenship", dans Alan C. Cairns, Reconfigurations. Canadian Citizenship and Constitutional Change, Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 1995, pp. 157-185).
7. C. TAYLOR, »Convergences et divergences des valeurs entre le Québec et le Canada» dans C. TAYLOR, Rapprocher les solitudes. Écrits sur le fédéralisme et le nationalisme au Canada, Québec, Presses de l'université Laval, 1992, p.179.
8. I. M. YOUNG, «Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship» dans C. SUNSTEIN (dir.), Feminism & Political Theory, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989, p.117.
9. F. AUDIGIER, «Concept de base et compétences-clés de l'éducation à la citoyenneté démocratique : une première synthèse », Séminaire Concept de base et compétences clés, Conseil de l'Europe, document DECS/CIT (98) 7, 1997. à la p. 7.
10. M. COUTU, «Introduction : droits fondamentaux et citoyenneté », dans M. COUTU , P. BOSSET, C. GENDREAU et D. VILLENEUVE (dir.), Droits fondamentaux et citoyenneté. Une citoyenneté fragmentée, limitée ou illusoire ? Montréal, éditions Thémis, 2000.
11. Voir W. KYMLICKA et W. NORMAN, «Return of the Citizens : A survey of Recent Work on Citizenship Theory», (1994) 104 Ethics 352.
12. M. LABELLE et D. SALÉE, «La citoyenneté en question : l'État canadien face à l'immigration et à la diversité nationale et culturelle», (1999) 31 Sociologie et Sociétés 125, à la p. 141.

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## Duncan text – footnotes

1. There is no conceptual reason to limit ourselves to two communities or to dual citizenship. Multiple citizenships are quite conceivable and multiple transnational communities exist in the form of well-established diaspora, such as the Jewish diaspora.
2. "I swear (or affirm) that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, Queen of Canada, Her Heirs and Successors, and that I will faithfully observe the laws of Canada and fulfil my duties as a Canadian citizen." (From the Citizenship Act)
3. Some of which, one must acknowledge, have more value than others.
4. Citizenship regimes afford governments the ability to deport non-citizens for certain criminal acts. Deportation is a good deal more difficult, although not impossible, for naturalized immigrants.
5. One might argue that the reaction of some governments to the September 11, 2001 attack on New York and Washington have brought at least a partial return to a much differentiated society, differentiated along citizenship lines in part. There is some evidence for this, but I would suggest that this is a temporary anomaly whose impact will diminish in turn in the face of the relentless features of globalization.
6. Of course, an important aspect of shared citizenship is to seek greater assurance of the equality of opportunity, of freedom from discrimination, of freedom from deep poverty, etc.
7. Note the current concerns of some European countries of maintaining their national identities in the face of the increasingly multicultural nature of their populations. Note, too, that Canadian policy requires new citizens to have a minimum proficiency in one of Canada's official languages