The Conundrum of Religious Diversity in Canada's Multicultural Society

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Paul Bowlby examines the role of religious difference in Canada, while questioning the popular postmodern view of Canadian society. How can we construct an authentic postmodern ideal with the goal of making multicultural belonging meaningful? This "ongoing civil project," the author argues, must take into consideration the need for true recognition, which includes recognizing the fundamental importance to many groups of religious life.

Religious freedom is one of the benchmarks for human rights. At the same time, even before 9/11, and certainly in its wake, religions were often viewed as sources of divisiveness in democratic societies. In common speech, "secular society" describes a place for religions as one of many types of voluntary association. Such a place for religious life, however, ignores the fact that religions have been among the most important characteristics of societies and cultures and have had major political, social, economic and cultural consequences. The peculiar tension between religious freedom as a human right and the place of religions in culture and society invites a reflection on the relationship between religion and multicultural policy in Canada.

For an understanding of religions it has been a long-standing principle that it is essential to understand religions on their own terms. Multiculturalism in Canada has appeared to echo that principle in that its purpose was to endorse the existence and the preservation of ethnic and religious diversities in Canada. At the same time as such high purposes are endorsed there has emerged a suspicion that multiculturalism is a postmodern solution to ethnic and religious diversity. As such, it endorses a view of society called 'secular' into which all diversities must fit. For all citizens a secular framework seeks to encourage historical forgetfulness[1] about the complex roles of ethnic and religious traditions in social and political life. To privilege such forgetfulness is to undercut an aspiration for an authentic multiculturalism which would hold out to Canadians the hope that religious and ethnic diversities could contribute substantively, out of their fundamental traditions and convictions, to the future of Canadian society.

Religions, like race relations, have contentious, indeed oppressive dimensions to their history, to say the least. But it is also around religious difference that there are, I want to argue, intimations of the substance of authentic "recognition" (Taylor, 1994) fundamental to multiculturalism. Canada could not have been created without building into its constitution recognition of the differences between French Roman Catholics and English Protestants (O'Toole, 1996). Recognition of the role of religious difference in education and health, not to mention the lines of allegiance to political parties meant that Canada's constitutional solution stood over against both the separation of church and state in the American constitution and the British model of an established religion. In what follows, I will argue that the historic role of religious difference in Canada provides a clue to what counts as authentic recognition for a contemporary multicultural society.

Postmodern Multiculturalism

What does it mean to live in a "habitat" (Day, 2000:200), the principal governing feature of which is to socially construct forgetfulness of historic and religious traditions? In North America, Europe and elsewhere, nation states have already undergone, or are still undergoing, the transformation from polities inhabited primarily by single ethnicities or nations into societies in which citizenship is constituted by a pluralism of ethnic and religious diversities. In the transition there is the attendant fear among the nations which were once dominant that their particular construction of citizenship and society cannot be sustained when fractured by such a range of differences. The once dominant 'nations' see themselves becoming simply one of the many ethnicities existing within the habitat of a state and its marketplace globally designated as secular society.

Canada's immigration policies once depended upon the forcible exclusion of undesirable immigrants or the forced assimilation of peoples into either the French or English nations. Multiculturalism sets out to remedy such solutions by appearing to endorse the maintenance of enduring difference among immigrant populations, while enforcing by all the

means available to it the "rational-bureaucratic discipline" of the economic and political orders. (Day, 2000:204) The ubiquitous terms 'values' and 'styles' drawn on the one hand from economics and on the other from the fashion industry, illustrate the seductive ways of speaking which permit illusions of diversity. Individuals possess their values and styles but only within the "rational-bureaucratic discipline" of the state and the marketplace. Within Day's view then, multiculturalism exists to leave people "as they are" so that they can be free to participate as human capital in the common habitat provided for them by the state's political economy. The effect is to create a concept of citizenship and a polity which is immune to granting authentic 'recognition' that might threaten to alter substantially the terms and conditions of the established socio-political order. Religious schools cannot be recognized on a par with public schools, unless like the Roman Catholic schools in Ontario they can claim an historic constitutional ground for separateness. Religious schools are viewed as a threat to the sphere of the common or the secular, rather than as a contributor to substantive diversity as a resource for a multicultural society. Whether we like it or not, such exclusion from recognition creates a postmodern multiculturalism in which the diversities can exist in appearances – colourful dress and traditions of dance and music – while being required to situate as invisibly as possible their substantive culture and religious life at the margins of society.

A Critque of Postmodern Multiculturalism

A substantial critique of multiculturalism comes from the voices of peoples whose intimacy with colonialism is only a few generations past. Ziauddin Sarder is one of those voices. He is of Pakistani origin, a British citizen, Muslim, and culture critic. In his view, postmodernism is the shape of the "new imperialism of western culture." (Sardar, 1998) To create a postmodern habitat of forgetfulness is to deny validity to traditions as recognized participants in a civil society. Invalidation becomes the precondition for an neo-imperial dominance overall cultural and religious diversties.

The focus for his analysis of the postmodern habitats centres on the production of forms of high and low culture which reify as they popularize the endlessly varied forms of disinformation about the "other." Disinformation and ridicule of their religious and cultural traditions serve in his view the purposes of western economic dominance. The disinformation arises out of four fundamental characteristics of a postmodern polity. First, all worldviews are transformed from truth-claims grounding ways of life by a relativisim insisting that all "grand narratives of all world views are socially constructed in time and by chance." (1998:8) Such a relativism renders all reality into a contingency. In turn, the relative and the contingent qualities of reality provide the context for ridicule since no truth-claim can ever be what it is claimed to be by those speaking it. Without any absolute ground for what is real, Sardar argues that the postmodern view further transforms all reality into "simulations, models, pure images and representations." (1998:10) Such a conviction means that difference or diversity in a postmodern culture are just social constructs whose temporary existence is an irritant awaiting its cure through assimilation.

Such an end for ethnic or religious difference begs the question about the cure. For what is it that defines the healthy state toward which postmodern assimilation leads? There can only be more relativistic social constructions which are created and defined by those who wield power within a political economy. Such a social and individual nihilism in the final analysis cannot sustain any enduring conception of justice morality, law or political economy (1998:10). All there is, is the exercise of power in a vacuum. For multiculturalism, the postmodern amounts in the end to the theft of any substantive meaning of difference, be it religious or ethnic. So understood, multiculturalism becomes the means to colonize again, "to render the Other into its [the west's] own image." (1998:15)

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The Search for an Authentic Postmodernism

> *Multiculturalism is a necessary quest not just for any self-respecting society, but for human social evolution as such.* (Sardar, 2003:7)

Multiculturalism sets out to solve a perceived problem. Critics of modern imperialisms know that there is a long lineage of European anthropological discourse which constructed European national identities over against a barbaric 'otherness' of the Asian, African, aboriginal or

Middle Eastern peoples. The construction of the Other in Canada – that is, the non-British or French, the non-European – must be understood first and foremost within the framework of an orientalist worldview. In orientalist discourses disinformation (a form of ridicule) about other peoples and their religious and cultural traditions is the basis for the arguments that justice, freedom, liberty or human rights are names for ways of civil living which have no existence outside the European anthropology and its polities. The cultural resources of Chinese, Japanese, South Asian, African, Middle Eastern, Muslim, Native Peoples have no corresponding experience of, or comparable principles for, civil life. To hold such an orientalist and imperialist view of the Other grounded arguments about why Chinese or Japanese peoples should be excluded from Canada. The argument also ensures that the Canadian civil life and its institutions are viewed as non-negotiable interpretations rather than as a common ongoing interpretive project of the diversity which it constitutes.

What then are the resources we can call up to reformulate the discourse within which we speak of "being Canadian," and the fact of our ethnic and religious diversity? Both Sardar and Day are asking what might count as an authentic multiculturalism or, to use Charles Taylor's term, what might count as authentic recognition of ethnic and religious diversity? As major urban centers in Canada and many places around the world are transformed into multi-ethnic, multi-religious habitats, such questions about what multiculturalism is to mean, broaden into the most fundamental politico-religious questions about the meaning of the state and its governance as a means to express justice, freedom, liberty and human rights.

Alan C. Cairns, in his remarkable book *Citizen's Plus: Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian State* (2000), sets out to discuss the renewal of civil society and by implication, the place of multiculturalism in it. To that end I want to take up Cairns' general question: "What kind of country-wide Canadian political community are we aiming for?" He continues:

> A viable constitutional vision, I argue, must address two facts: Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians differ from each other; our differences are not total. There is much overlap – and we share a common space. *Are our future constitutional arrangements going to foster some version of common belonging so that we will feel responsible for each other, and will be eager to engage in some common enterprises, as well as accommodate our differences?* (Cairns, 2000:5-6 emphasis mine)

That Cairns formulates this question with regard to the history of colonial relations with native peoples is, of course, of primary importance since the effects of Canada's appropriation of the British imperial – orientalist discourses have defined a shameful history which implicates both government and the major Christian churches (cf. Miller, 1999). At the same time, the question he poses, which focuses around themes of common space or habitat, the grounds for being "responsible" for one another and accommodating differences is of profound significance for an authentic "recognition" of native peoples and, I would argue for an authentic multiculturalism which can provide for real religious or ethnic differences as enduring social realities in Canada.

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Cairns' question points away from the radical individualism so important to postmodernist views of secular societies, toward a view of the interdependence of peoples and nations as the primary civil context of society. Such a view is not without some tension-laden precedent in the Canadian context. I can only allude to it as a subject for deeper reading.[2] A homogenous nation either ethnically or religiously was never a possibility in Canada. Recognition of religious and linguistic difference translated into a rejection of the British model of an Established Church, and no less significant, a rejection of the American constitutional model of separation of church and state. At Confederation, the Roman Catholic Church in Quebec and the Protestant churches in the English speaking provinces had, as Sardar suggested, "access and opportunity in political representation, in education and in the pursuit of economic goals." (Sardar, 2003:8)

The example of recognition in the 1867 constitution sets out a precedent and a measure for recognition within an authentic multiculturalism. To what extent are we prepared to recognize religious difference as a basis for renegotiating jurisdiction over education, or language, or justice in culture. To take schooling as but one example, the deconfessionalization of schools and the refusal to extend the opportunity for other traditions to develop tax supported schools comparable to the Roman Catholic schools in Ontario suggests that there is a long way to go if we hope to have an authentic multiculturalism and substantive recognition of ethnic and religious difference as constituents of Canadian civil society.

What is crucial here is that recognition is defined by access to real social roles and powers within a civil society. Allegiance or loyalty are not abstractions, but virtues given substance in the specifics of the communities in which people live. As peoples create their mosques, synagogues,

temples, churches in their communities, not only is the community transformed architecturally, it is transformed by the diversity of peoples staking their claim to their place in society and with it the length and breadth of their civil society. As those same religious institutions build schools to educate their children in their religious life and cultural ways, they are building an attachment to their place within Canada. Out of such buildings come roots and the conviction that the habitat belongs as much them as it does to their neighbours. In such a shared habit families can know that they share the virtues of a citizenship which claims them not in spite of their differences, but because of their differences of religion or ethnicity. Such a claim is impossible to imagine from within a postmodern view of citizenship.

If multiculturalism is to name the aspiration to integrate people into the ongoing civil project called Canada, then one of the most important strategies is to remember what created and sustained civic virtues through wars and through and the great depression and modernization. Those virtues were grounded in the localities in which people lived. Their lives were made within intersecting institutional commitments which ranged across schools and stores, named byways and highways, large and small businesses, landscapes and cities, churches and synagogues. Duplication of these realities is neither desirable nor possible. What is required is the recognition that enhancing their contemporary analogues is a ground upon which a modern multicultural civil society becomes possible. What are the diverse locations within the Canadian habitat which cultivate the experiences of virtues conducive to a civil society? To ask that question invites an exploration of the interdependence about which Cairns' books so eloquently speak. It invites an exploration of difference as grounds of contribution in the concrete architecture of lived habitats rather than exercises of the powers of exclusion.

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Notes

1 "Religious memory is endangered because all memory is problematic in modern societies, and such societies appear increasingly unable to produce meaning systems based on a chain of believing or to sustain 'a living, collective memory as a source of meaning both for the present and for the future.' (Hervieu-Leger 1994, 125-6. Cited in O'Toole, 2000:48)

2 Jane Jenson and Martin Papillon point out that:

> [T]he linguistic and religious differences between the two European peoples who founded modern Canada were explicitly accepted and recognized in institutions, first by the British Crown and then in the 1867 Constitution, which set up new rules for democratic decision-making. Formal recognition of the relevance of cultural differences through the attribution to provinces of jurisdiction over education, language, justice in private matters and culture was a "non-negotiable condition in turn for Quebec's acceptance of a federal Parliament where the French-speaking Canadians would be a permanent minority." (Jenson and Papillon, 2001:10)