

From the Backdrop to the Foreground: Understanding Religion in Canadian Society

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Although multiculturalism as a policy and as a general orientation toward difference leads us to celebrate Canada's increasing religious diversity, we should not forget the historical and current power of Christianity. I suggest this not as a civilized gesture of kindness toward a disappearing tradition (which is not disappearing in any event), but because over our country's relatively brief life, Christianity has been thoroughly woven into almost all dimensions of contemporary Canadian culture. I would like to explore both the text of Canadian religious diversity, and the subtext of the power of Christianity in Canada.

Consider this partial list of values and ideas: our generally shared notions of *civility and moderation*, the elements of the Canadian identity most frequently marketed to ourselves, newcomers, and outsiders; the advanced or late *capitalism* that has become so naturalized that many of its proponents no longer see it as one ideology among many; the *charity and commitment to solidarity* on which our social safety net is based; the *justice and forgiveness* on which aspects of our criminal justice system are purportedly based; the *patriarchy* which is such a crucial feature of our form of governance and economy; the *heterosexual monogamous* model of (and for) marriage; the *chastity* that guides some groups' sexual mores; the *objectification* of the natural world; the *individualism* that undergirds our education systems. These are just some of the dimensions of our society that spring directly or indirectly from certain forms of Christianity. Canada's non-Christian religious traditions also embrace and promote several of these values, but most emerged out of the dominant role of Christianity in Canadian society.

Unfortunately, what is conspicuously absent from our public conversation about citizenship is a meaningful acknowledgement and excavation of the fundamental role of religion in the emergence and continual renegotiation of values such as those outlined above (Coward 1999). One way to enter into the question of the contemporary relevance of religion in Canada is to consider the ways religion continues to influence social values, group values, and individual values.

Society

It is hard to overstate the influence of popular culture's depiction of American society in the way Canadians think about our own society. A friend of mine describes this as the "Law and Order effect," referring, of course, to the way many Canadians believe that our legal system reflects the system depicted in this popular American television program. This is why many Canadians believe we have "Miranda rights," "District Attorneys," and the absolute right to free speech.

A similar kind of influence prevents many of us from understanding the historical and contemporary roles of religion in Canadian society. Many Canadians will tell you that Canadian society is characterized by a "separation of church and state," even though our state has never framed itself in this manner. This is not to say that we are, or were, a theocratic society; but it is to say that the theoretically clean notion of the separation of church and state is a quite inappropriate way of characterizing Canadian history.

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Several examples of the intimate relationship between church and state in Canada should illustrate this point. Among people with even a passing familiarity with Canadian history it is common knowledge that Christianity was an absolutely crucial component of the confidence – even the hubris – necessary for the colonization of Canada and the marginalization of First Nations people. "A Mari usque ad Mare," (from sea to sea) the motto on the Canadian Coat of Arms, is based on Psalm 72:8, ("He shall have dominion from sea to sea and from the river unto the ends of the earth") and was assumed to resonate strongly with the European settlers' and governors' efforts to domesticate and Christianize (the two processes were understood to be part and parcel of the same endeavour) what is now Canada.

Also well known is the at least ethno-centric and at worst shameful role of Christian missionaries (my maternal great-grandfather among them) and residential schools in the government's efforts to assimilate the "savages." Natives and non-natives are still reaping the socio-economic whirlwind sown by that particular policy, and it is a small miracle that there is currently a renaissance of, rather than a requiem for, aboriginal spirituality in this country.

Similarly, any consideration of the educational systems throughout Canada will also indicate the power of religion (again, here we are speaking mostly of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism as another variant of the two solitudes) to shape the content of classroom teaching, the location of schools, and a number of other features of educational systems that in several provinces have only recently become fully secular (Sweet 1997). The age-old questions over the public funding of religious schools (unheard of in the United States) not only remind us of the still constitutionally-guaranteed privileges accorded to certain religious groups in some provinces but of some of the ways Christianity has shaped and still shapes some of the basic values of our society.

Groups

As a result of the virtual invisibility of the power of Christianity in Canadian culture and society, inasmuch as the place of religion in the creation of our values is addressed directly, it is usually in appreciative tones regarding the important role played by religion in the social cohesion of well-contained ethnic groups. In these cases the role of religion should be understood neither as a quaint transient anachronism, nor as an obstacle to integration. For many ethnic communities (the Italians, Portuguese, Greeks, Punjabis, Tamils, Japanese, Chinese, Salvadorans, to name only a few), religious organizations often provide newcomers with an established network of familiar people speaking a familiar symbolic and actual language; however, such groups also represent for many newcomers their first personal connections with and entry-points to Canadian society.

Although these churches and temples and so forth serve as contexts in which people can maintain continuity in their religious and cultural lives, it would be a mistake to conclude that such groups are exclusively oriented toward preserving a static notion of ethnic and ethno-religious identity. In fact, these groups are vital and often highly creative integrative sites in which newcomers can negotiate their unique Canadian identities out of a combination of new and old resources. The values that we might think of as Greek-Canadian, or Salvadoran-Canadian are often formed with the help of religious traditions that are increasingly transnational and flexible in nature. The assumption that members of ethnic communities will eventually cease to negotiate their Canadian identities in religious contexts and manners is based mainly on the secularization hypothesis, the notion that religion *per se* will fade away as more people embrace modernization and western rationality. To the disappointment of many social scientists, empirical evidence has again and again failed to confirm this hypothesis. Some groups and individuals will fall away from religious involvement and identification, some will not, and some will and then will return. Perhaps it has always been thus.

Individuals

It is quite difficult, and quite tiring, to point out to educated friends and neighbours that, as I mentioned, the

evidence quite clearly indicates that religion and spirituality are not in retreat in the face of reason, science or modernization. The classical secularization hypothesis may explain or describe certain pockets of Western Europe, but it certainly fails to explain the enduring place of religion in the lives of North Americans (Swatos 1999). Although Canadians are clearly no longer firmly loyal to specific places of worship, and are less and less inclined to see regular church or mosque attendance as crucial markers of their own spirituality, they do continue to indicate in various non-traditional and traditional ways that they embrace ideas, values, and beliefs deeply embedded in religion (Bibby 2002).

So, what has changed is not the influence of religion on individual values, but what one might call the trajectory of that influence. That is, religion and spirituality, as sources of influence in individual lives, are a great deal more differentiated (in an influential book, Reginald Bibby (1987) used the term "fragmented," but this has a pejorative connotation), and diffused throughout our society and its concomitant cultures. It is tempting to tell the story of religion in Canada as a story of gradual disinterest on the part of individuals, leading to a decline in institutions, leading ultimately to a decline in what one might call the overall "volume" or "mass" of religion in Canada. Some of this has happened, in some places, for particular reasons, at least for now.

However, it is more appropriate, I believe, to think of the diminished power of Canada's religious institutions as indicative of a radical process of societal and personal reorientation perhaps similar in scope to what happened in Europe in the wake of Martin Luther's reforms. This is largely the result of the increasing religious and ethnic diversity of Canadian culture, increasing (though partial) efforts on the part of government officials to extirpate religious influences from public institutions, and an increasing public suspicion of established institutions and their representatives. All of this leads to a Canadian context in which the established ways of organizing religious groups and maintaining individual religious identities is characterized by flux.

If such a state (such a "post-modern" condition, perhaps) is ever to resolve itself, it is by no means necessarily the case that it will resolve itself in the direction of atheism or simple secularization. In fact, as many people seek support for their often inchoate feelings of alienation from the consumerism, individualism and corporate form of globalization they may feel is ruining our earth, they may be surprised to discover that over the past forty years, religious groups have continued in their own ways to oppose or critique these elements of modernity. Such a convergence of the post-modern individual (casting about for a new means of defining herself over and against a culture she may see as hegemonic) with the sometimes surprisingly dynamic and prophetic church, temple or synagogue, could usher in a new era for both the individual and the religious organization. This is but one possibility, of course.

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Conclusion

In order to promote the goals of multicultural citizenship, and as a tacit acknowledgement of the damages inflicted on many people (and peoples) by religious groups, over the past forty years members of the Canadian elite opted at least to try to exclude religion (that is, all religion) from the conversation taking place in the media, the government, and public schools. The underlying assumption here, of course, was that since religion is perceived by some observers to be unruly, anti-rational, and incendiary, it would be prudent simply to marginalize it altogether. There was very little malice in this tacit decision, but there was also precious little forethought. And now we are dealing with the fallout from the half-century old decision to compress religion into the private realm and to deal with it only when it noisily intrudes into our public sphere – as a problem in need of a social or political solution. To cite the most obvious example, the tragic events of September 11th 2001 revealed the appalling societal ignorance in Canada and the US with respect both to Islam and to the "cosmic battle" members of many small and not-so-small religious groups (including many North American Christian groups) are waging in various ways against what they perceive to be a hegemonic secular establishment bent on the destruction of all righteous values (Juergensmeyer 2001).

Over the centuries in North America, religion has not receded, though it has definitely changed in some fairly unpredictable ways. But it still influences the shared values of the larger society, the particular values of religious or ethnic (or ethno-religious) groups, and the often highly particular values that individuals might embrace. An enlightened public examination of current and future forms of Canadian citizenship therefore requires a consideration of these three enduring yet dynamic modes of influence.

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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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Frith text – references

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

Giroux text – références

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.

Rummens text – bibliography

Joanna Anneke Rummens. "Redefining the Canadian Demos: Towards a Trans-Cultural Citizenship Charter." Canadian Issues. February 2002: 15-18.

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