RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN CANADA

in the Shadow of Christian Privilege

ABSTRACT

This article explores the contours of religious diversity in Canada and finds that while nascent religious pluralism is discernible, vestigial Christian privilege appears to be impeding the substantive inclusion of religious minorities in the Canadian "shared citizenship model."

JOHN BILES
Metropolis Project Team, Citizenship and Immigration Canada

HUMERA IBRAHIM
Multiculturalism Program, Department of Canadian Heritage

Religion in general and religious diversity in particular appears to create discomfort and at times strikes fear in the average Canadian. Religiously affiliated extremists like those Sikhs who were responsible for the Air India bombing; the form of Christianity that guided Timothy McVeigh in the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma; the Buddhist extremists who deployed nerve gas in the Tokyo subway; the Hindu nationalists responsible for large scale slaughter of Indian Muslims; extreme Jewish Zionists who have contributed to turmoil in the Middle East; or Muslim radicals who have been linked to bombings in Bali, Madrid, New York and London, dominate the portrayals of religion and pluralism in popular discourse, especially the mass media (Juergensmeyer 2001).

Even when death and destruction are not directly pinned on the religious, commentators are quick to find fault. Gender equality and human sexuality are two of the most frequently cited exemplars of how the values of the religious clash with the supposedly secular values of contemporary Canadian society. Less attention is paid to the unequal treatment of women almost across the entire spectrum of Canadian society. Even less energy is spent on ascertaining why it is that gays and lesbians in Canada have had to force governments, and the people they represent, to the judicial wall in order to attain the same rights accorded to other Canadians for decades.

What makes the Canadian case interesting on the question of religion is how its world-renowned multicultural framework interacts with religious diversity and whether it truly results, or even can result in harmonious religious pluralism. There are many who would suggest that this is an impossibility. We are not among them.

Legislative/Constitutional Framework

Unlike many of the countries covered here, Canada does not have an established religion. Indeed, Prime Minister Paul Martin has recently reacted to a planned meeting of Vatican officials to discuss sanctions against Catholic politicians who violate church doctrine on the question of homosexuality by declaring that there is a division between church and state in Canada (*Ottawa Citizen* 2005). He is not alone. Public discourse is full of decision leaders like politicians and journalists who are quick to pronounce the division of church and state in Canada (Biles 2005). This is technically accurate, yet there is no denying the privilege that Christianity has had in Canada and largely retains until today. Researchers are more likely to describe Canada as a nation with a "shadow establishment" (Martin 2000).

This quasi-status of Christianity should not be overly surprising in a nation where the vast majority of citizens are Christians and where Christianity has been a central element of Canadian society since the arrival of Europeans (Ogilvie 2003). The result is a wilful ignorance to the enduring power and privilege accorded to Christianity in Canada today. Examples of this ongoing power and privilege include: denominational schools in many provinces (Seljak 2005); national s ymbols and imagery imbued with Christian references (Biles and Ibrahim 2005); the continued battle over the *Lord's Day Act* in Nova Scotia; frequent skirmishes over the appropriateness of prayer marking the opening of councils and legislatures (Harvey 2000); and the nearly complete domination of Christians and Jews in the elected offices of the land (Andrew, Biles, Siemiatycki and Tolley forthcoming).

On the one hand then, Canada has a very pervasive Christian ethos, and on the other there is a remarkable suite of legislation including the Charter of Rights and Freedoms as part of the *Constitution Act*, the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act*, the *Human Rights Act*, and the *Immigration and*

Refugee Protection Act that seek to frame an inclusive Canada where there is no place for the distribution and retention of privilege and power on the basis of ethnicity, race, religion, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, or ability, to name but a few. Canadians are therefore faced with an unsettling discordance between the inclusive society to which we aspire and the fact of continuing Christian dominance.

Demographics

Addressing this discordance becomes ever more pressing. Religious diversity in Canada is growing at breakneck pace.[1] While Christian denominations have been in steep decline over the last few decades, this decline appears to be stabilizing (Bibby 2004). At the same time, growth among Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist and other non-Christian religiously affiliated Canadians continues to grow rapidly. The Canadian Muslim population grew at a rate of 128.9 per cent between 1991 and 2001, a rate of growth only exceeded by those Canadians reporting an affiliation with Aboriginal spirituality (175 per cent). Projections conducted by Statistics Canada for the Department of Canadian Heritage suggest that these populations will continue to grow and will account for between 9.2 and 11.2 per cent of the Canadian population by 2017. In 2001 these Canadians comprised 6.3 per cent of the population, up from approximately four per cent in 1991 (Statistics Canada 2005).

Thus, while most global religious traditions and Christian denominations have been extant in Canada for extended periods (Bramadat and Seljak 2005, forthcoming), this renewed growth suggests that Canadians and their governments had better seriously address religious pluralism, if we are to ensure that the Canadian approach to "shared citizenship" continues to thrive. True, these traditions, like Christian denominations, are internally heterogeneous, and their absolute numbers remain small. For example, the largest minority faith, Islam, had just 579,700 adherents according to the 2001 Census of a total population of just over thirty million. Nevertheless the tripling of communities in a twenty-five year period to over a tenth of the Canadian population is a seismic shift in demography comparable to the rise of "visible minority" populations in the 1970s and 1980s.

Examples of compromises

We are not without hope in this regard as practical examples of negotiated compromise surround us. International scholars suggest that some of the most telling areas of exploration for how governments address diversity are in three institutions that almost completely structure the lives of the individuals committed to their care: education systems, corrections and the military (IJMS 1999). In the Canadian case there is clearly movement towards a space more open to religious pluralism. For example, as Seljak observes, the secularization of the education system in Newfoundland and Labrador in 1997 is indicative of "the retreat of Christianity" across the country (Seljak 2005).

Similarly, the Chaplaincy Service of the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) has worked in recent years to ensure that non-Christian inmates' needs are addressed. The CSC has had to approach Treasury Board for additional resources to provide halal and kosher meals as well as other religiously required items (Galloway 2003). In addition, religion was included as part of a human rights audit undertaken in 2002 (CSC 2002). While the primary finding of the report was that "Resource and basic service standards for minority faith groups are either too vague or non-existent," there is no denying that progress has subsequently been made: the Correctional Service hired an imam in Quebec and announced its intention to hire a full-time imam in Ontario in addition to the part- time leaders from a range of faiths already engaged by the CSC (Chen 2004).

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The Canadian military and the Department of National Defence, which has been severely criticized for its attitude towards diversity following the Somalia affair[2] and the disbanding of the airborne regiment after videos of racist and degrading hazing were aired on the news, has also made significant inroads. Harassment awareness training has been made mandatory and recruitment strategies have been developed to attract Canadians of all backgrounds (Pratt 2004). These efforts are starting to show results: The first Muslim to serve as a military chaplain, Suleyman Demiray was appointed in December 2003; and the first hijab wearing Canadian woman to serve in the Canadian military, Wafa Dabbagh, reports she has been welcomed by the navy (Harvey 2003, Lajoie 2004).

Challenges: Public Discourse and Attitudes

Despite the abundance of examples of successful compromise amongst Canadians of diverse backgrounds, challenges, of course, remain. The most pressing at the moment is the relentless treatment of Canadian Muslims as an un-integratable mass of illiberal individuals who pose a threat to Canadian society. A problem that predates the 2001 terrorist attacks, that have merely intensified what some term "Islamaphobia" (Carens and Williams 1996). This erroneous and bigoted attitude is widely held, is extremely unhelpful in building an inclusive Canada, and results in some serious illiberal behaviours on the part of other Canadians and Canadian institutions.

The most evident area of public discomfort with religious diversity pertains to national security and public safety. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 Canadians have repeatedly reported that they are willing to sacrifice some human rights for greater safety.

This feeling is shared by Canadians of all religious backgrounds, where the challenge comes is in ensuring that all Canadians are treated equally and some are not asked to sacrifice more than others.

Similarly, issues around gender relations and sexual orientation have taken center stage in Canada over the last year. The question of faith based arbitration in Ontario has garnered headlines across the country and around the world. While the Premier of Ontario has declared that sharia will not be accepted in Ontario and that his government will therefore revise legislation to outlaw all faith based arbitration in the area of family law, the role of women in Islam has been fore grounded and cast once again in a negative light[3]. Far less attention is paid to the role of women in Catholicism or Judaism for example (Carens and Williams 1996).

Same sex marriage has been an even more contentious issue in the Canadian context and has led to extensive public discourse around the appropriate relationship of religion and public policy. Aspersions have been cast from both sides of the debate. Despite internal heterogeneity amongst Christian denominations and other faiths, in general religious Canadians have been cast as illiberal by their fellow citizens and have been demonized accordingly. Public debate in the Canadian context tends to be rather controlled and seldom strays from the multicultural frame, this was not the case in this instance: rhetoric was in many cases extremely nasty (Biles 2003).

Finally, examples of mundane discrimination, mundane in the sense of the nitpicky silly issues that shouldn't preoccupy a society, continue to affect minority religious communities. Planning permission is one of the most commonly cited. Nothing is more difficult to build in Canada than a mosque (Isin and Siemiatycki 1999), although as McClelland and White (2005) chronicle, Canadian Buddhists are not exempt from mistreatment either. Chinese Canadians seeking to ensure funeral homes are not built in their neighbourhoods are also frequently in for a rough ride (Mullington 2000). In almost all cases, minority communities eventually prevail, but not before they have expended considerable time, energy and financing that Christian Canadians do not have to invest in similar activities.

One final example, although more systemic than the other mundane examples listed here is the near complete dominance of the Christian calendar in Canadian institutions. Even though other countries like Singapore have long adjusted to multiple faiths' high holidays, Canada lags behind. The Government of Canada allows its employees to decide whether they will work on the August long week end or St Jean Baptiste Day[4], they do not offer the same opportunity to employees deciding whether to work on Christmas Day or Yom Kippur. Canadian universities are no better, while many will allow students to move their exams, only York University schedules exams to avoid faith days and it is just one of four Canadian universities that has a policy ensuring that assignments are not due on faith days (Harvey 2002).

Surely a society committed to inclusion should take some collective responsibility and action to ensure that disproportionate costs are not borne by some of its least advantaged citizens who merely wish to exercise their rights.

Opportunities: Moving Ahead

These ideological blinders that see the world only through the eyes of Christianity must be removed if Canada is to successfully become an inclusive society in the twenty-first century. As we have seen from the demographic projections, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, Jewish and other religious traditions are going to continue to grow in Canada, and grow rapidly. Their concerns cannot be ignored *ad infinitem* without serious issues of exclusion emerging. Like the British and the Australian governments which have recently commissioned large studies on religious diversity (Weller, Feldman and Purdam 2001; Cahill, Bouma and Dellal 2004), it is time to take a serious look at Christian privilege, to ascertain where the "secular" state interacts with citizens in uneven ways, and to devise inclusive pluralistic solutions that will benefit all Canadians. We could do far worse than establish a unit of government devoted to unpacking this difficult issue and mapping our way forward. Race relations units in the 1980s and early 1990s were vital to unpacking white privilege, Status of Women Canada to this day promotes gender-based analysis to tackle male privilege, and the Official Languages Commissioner seeks to protect official language minorities' rights. Who looks after the rights of Canadians who aren't Christian?

Conclusion:

Religious diversity is here to stay. Only a commitment to real religious pluralism will ensure that the Canadian commitment to a "shared citizenship" model under girded by a multicultural ideology will flourish in the 21st century. As we have demonstrated in this article, there is an ability to negotiate amongst faith communities to ensure equitable outcomes. True to form for the two-way street model of integration in Canada, Canadians and Canadian institutions must make space for minority religious traditions, and those traditions must adapt to Canadian society. While this plays itself out in myriad ways across Canada everyday, what is lacking is a coherent national approach. So, while Hindus may have adapted burial rituals to meet Canadian health regulations (Bannerjee and Coward 2005), and the Correctional Service of Canada may have hired imams in Ontario and Quebec, more often than not individuals, families and communities must deploy scarce resources and fight each of these battles themselves. Surely a society committed to inclusion should take some collective responsibility and action to ensure that disproportionate costs are not borne by some of its least advantaged citizens who

merely wish to exercise their rights. The experience of Buddhists seeking to build a temple on the Niagara escarpment should be enough to get governments to ensure other Canadians do not face similar problems (McClelland and White 2005).

Religious diversity is not a bogey (wo)man that Canadians should fear. Just as Catholics and Jews have become important components of Canadian society, without we might add, society coming apart at the seams, so too can other faiths take their rightful place in Canadian society.

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Notes

[1] Of additional interest is that - far more Canadians reported in the 2001 Census that they had no religion. This group totalled 4.8 million in 2001 and accounted for 16% of the population, compared with 12% (3.33 million) a decade earlier. These numbers can be attributed to the growing number of atheists/agnostics in Canada, but also to some groups that felt their religion was not captured by the Census form (eg. Chinese religion) and also people who were concerned about their religion being noted by various authorities.

[2] Shidane Arone, a Somali man, was beaten to death by Canadian soldiers for trying to steal from them while the Canadian military was in Somalia as peacekeepers.

[3] The last time gender roles in Islam were as prevalently discussed in the media was in the early 1990s when discussion of female genital mutilation was widely debated. This largely came to an end when the Government of Canada amended the criminal code and prohibited the practice in Canada or the removing of people from Canada for it to be done.

[4] St Jean Baptiste Day is a nationalist holiday celebrated in Quebec.