BEYOND THE TROJAN HORSE

Religion, Immigration, and Canadian Public Discourse

ABSTRACT

In the past two or three decades, profound shifts have occurred in the religious landscape of this country. These developments are the result of at least two forces: first, the complex and contested expressions of some form of secularization and differentiation, and second, Canada's relatively progressive immigration policies. What are the implications of this new reality for Canadian religions? And are we too reluctant to the contradiction between a set of policies that frames religious diversity positively, and a broader society that lacks the most basic knowledge required to understand this new and extremely ambiguous feature of our society?

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Thanks to the prominence of a number of empirical studies, as well as the many media stories these have generated in the past several years,[1] many Canadians are by now accustomed to hearing that in the past two or three decades profound shifts have occurred in the religious landscape of this country. These developments are the result of at least two forces: first, the complex and contested expressions of some form of secularization and differentiation, and second, Canada's relatively progressive immigration policies.

While the combined influence of secularization and differentiation in Western countries is the subject of a very large scholarly literature,[2] the focus of this essay is the relationship between religion and immigration. After all, it is the relatively "new" religions (read: non-Christian religions, but also non-European Christianities), that most conspicuously challenge some of the fundamental assumptions and prejudices of many Canadians.

First, consider the kinds of changes we have seen between 1991 and 2001:[3]

- in 2001, 76% of Canadians identified themselves as Christians, whereas 82% of the country identified in this manner in 1991;
- 43% of Canadians are Roman Catholics, a figure that is basically unchanged since the last census;
- the percentage of Canadians who define themselves as Protestants has declined from 35% in 1991 to 29% in 2001;
- there has been significant growth in the unaffiliated conservative Protestant traditions;
- the Jewish population (329,000) has grown 4%;
- the Muslim community (580,000) has grown 129%;
- the Hindu and Sikh communities (300,000 and 280,000 respectively) have each grown about 89%;
- the Buddhist community (300,000) has increased by 83%;
- those indicating that they have no religion have increased significantly, from 12% to 16% (4.9 million) of the Canadian population; and
- weekly religious attendance has fallen from 53% in 1957 to about to about 19% in 2000.

These figures reflect at least three noteworthy shifts: 1) significant changes and declines within (especially "mainline") Euro-Canadian Christianity; 2) a growing tendency to opt out (permanently or temporarily) of traditional categories; 3) dramatic growth within traditions associated with "visible minority" ethno-religious populations.

What are the implications of this new reality for Canadian religions? As far as Christianity is concerned, non-European immigration is helping to sustain its dominant position in the so-called "religious marketplace." As well, the less ethnocentric immigration regime of the past few decades – manifested in the immigration of (to name but a few) Latino and Filipino Roman Catholics, African Anglicans, Korean Presbyterians, and Chinese evangelicals – is having a dramatic impact on Canadian churches.[4] For many Christians, these changes are ambiguous: on the one hand, non-European and non-white Christian newcomers bring in new members and enrich liturgical and ritual life. On the other hand, these newcomers also naturally influence and sometimes challenge established Canadian denominations (Bramadat and Seljak, forthcoming). The recent debates within the United Church and the Anglican Church over the churches' official positions on same-sex

marriage provide evidence of some of the strains of these changes. Of course, these issues have been debated without unequivocal resolution for some time, but it is noteworthy that within these two Protestant anchor denominations, many newcomer ethnic minority sub-communities seem to be consistently opposed to this expanded definition of marriage.[5]

While these changes in Canada's dominant tradition are significant, the dramatic – and, it must be admitted, for some, frightening – part of the new demographic reality of religion in Canada is the fact that between 1991 and 2001 the Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist communities have each either more than doubled, or nearly doubled in size. These increases should not surprise anyone, especially when one considers that the top ten source countries for immigration in 2002 included China, India, Pakistan, Iran, and Sri Lanka, obviously countries without Christian majority populations. Moreover, immigration from these five countries accounted for roughly 40% of all immigration that year and for nearly 80% of immigration from all top ten source countries combined.

One of the most interesting and complicated dimensions of these changes is the fact that in many of these growing groups, a nearly inextricable relationship exists between ethnic and religious modes of identification. This connection appears to be more salient in religious traditions associated with societies and cultures in which religious and ethnic identities have not become as differentiated or compartmentalized as they more commonly are in the so-called – though, we need to remember, never monolithic – West (Bramadat and Seljak, 2005; Berns McGown, 1999; McLellan, 1999).[6] In fact, almost every contemporary national and international news story involving religion – consider the "tables and chairs" debate in the Canadian Sikh community, the debate among Canadian Muslims over "Shariah tribunals," the responses of many non-Christian traditions to the same-sex marriage debate, the murder of Dutch artist Theo van Gogh by a radicalized Dutch Muslim of Moroccan descent – in fact also involves significant, even perhaps determinative ethnic themes. Efforts to tease apart these two forces are often doomed from the start.

If we can agree that religion – especially as it is expressed *alongside* or *within* ethnic terms – is a major feature of many of the challenges facing principally immigrant-receiving countries such as Canada, we need to ask ourselves if as a society we are capable of responding meaningfully to this ancient and yet modern force. To provide at least a provisional answer to this question, I want to consider two case studies of Canadian communities that have figured prominently in immigration-related news in the past decade. Then I want to offer a few suggestions for ways we might address our currently inadequate capacity for understanding the kinds of social changes related to the new degree of religious diversity in Canada.

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First, let us consider Chinese religion, a complex manifestation of Chinese culture (Thompson 1996; Paper, Paper, Lai, 2005) which includes features one normally associates with Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, and folk religion, but which may be considered greater than the sum of these parts. Many scholars of Chinese religion estimate that a significant majority of Chinese Canadians are engaged in some way in these integrated religious practices, principles, and worldviews. However, if we accept the 2001 Census at face value, roughly *four times* as many Chinese Canadians fall into the "no religion" category than do other Canadians.

This seems extremely counter-intuitive, given that many of the Chinese who claim to have no religion *also* engage in traditionally defined religious practices, including, among others, ancestor veneration or worship, divination, the celebration of religious festivals and rituals, and the veneration of indigenous and international Buddhist personages. A more plausible tripartite explanation for this statistical peculiarity is that "Chinese religion" is not an option on the censusform; Chinese religion is as yet un-acknowledged in Canadian public discourse; and the very concept or term "religion" as it is traditionally employed in the West does not necessarily name the diverse (yet nonetheless coherent) phenomena grouped together by scholars and others under the category Chinese religion.

In any case, Chinese religion does seem to function in the same way as other religions in that it provides a social and symbolic setting conducive to immigrant integration, a context for forming bonds of solidarity, a religious framework for preserving and passing on religio-cultural customs and convictions, etc. However, because we are reluctant to consider the deep connections between ethnic and religious modes of identification, we are still ignorant of some of the core religious sensibilities of probably well over half a million people in this country.

A second case study involves the two main varieties of post-September 11th discourse on Islam: for the sake of brevity, I distinguish here between "Islamophobic" and "naïve" approaches. The former term was coined nearly a decade ago in Europe[7] to denote a deep pre-rational fear of Islam and a commitment to the notion that Muslims belong, as Samuel Huntington famously and fatuously claimed, to a categorically different "civilization" with which the "West" must by definition "clash." Islamophobes would have us believe that Muslims can never really fit in in the "West" – due to their tradition's *inherently* illiberal and anti-democratic

roots. (This claim always puzzles the millions of Muslim democrats who have been living happily and productively in the West for decades or longer.) Like most phobias, Islamophobia is a problem wherever it appears; however, we are fortunate that brazen instances of Islamophobia are relatively rare in Canada.[8]

The second, or "naïve" approach to Islam – and religion in general – can be crudely summarized as follows: religion *per se* is a virtuous enterprise, so anyone who claims to have religious reasons for doing something violent or exclusionary must, by this common definition, be either: a) insane, b) ignorant about the true peaceful nature of his religion, or c) using religion as a Trojan horse within which he is hiding his true motivations, which are typically understood to be essentially political, sexual, or economic.

It is easy to understand why progressive liberals would define *true* Christianity, Islam, or Hinduism as being oriented essentially toward so-called progressive liberal pluralistic values. This approach to religion is very useful for people who are interested in using a religion, or several religions, to support their own spiritual quest. Unfortunately, to essentialize religion as a solely virtue-seeking project, and as an inherently sweet and lovely force, is to deny the deep complicity of religion in countless examples of cruelty and injustice.

Like democracy, feminism, capitalism, Christianity, and technology, Islam is an ambiguous system of ideas, texts, values, art, institutions and aesthetics that has been built over centuries by many people in many historical contexts. As such, we should expect that there will be a great many legitimate expressions of this tradition, and we should be suspicious of people who claim to speak on behalf of a self-evidently authoritative version. We should also be cautious about people who seek to correct menacing Islamophobic stereotypes by proffering naive stereotypes that attribute all illiberal events and actors to perversions of an essentially pure, virtuous, and divine entity.

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As Robert Orsi reminds us (2004), we must also pay attention to the prescriptive connotations of categories such as modern, secular, terrorism, and fundamentalism. Together these terms participate in the meta-narrative of modernist progress. This story, with its good guys (modern secular democrats) and its bad guys (atavistic fundamentalist religious zealots) is typically imperceptible to those within this story; to those outside of the story (that is, to the "fundamentalists") the narrative is perceived as hostile, demeaning, and hegemonic. The point is that the binary construction of Islam (as frightening or harmless) is an inadequate heuristic tool for understanding the real conflict between a certain form of Islam and certain dimensions of Western societies.

Among other things, these two case studies demonstrate that as a society, we are not well equipped to understand the deep religious diversity that is, of course, a predictable product of the principles that have guided our immigration policies for a few decades. Canada's famous "point system" approach to determining the suitability of Canadian immigration applicants is certainly not perfect, but it represents a marked improvement over the racial and ethnic "quota system" that once prevailed in this country, not to mention the more tribal, assimilationist, and guest worker policies one finds in Western Europe. However, recent events in Holland (the murder of Van Gogh), France (conflicts over restrictions on religious symbols in schools), and the Middle East (the on-going Arab-Israeli conflict, and the Iraqi front in the "war on terror"), have led some commentators to wonder if in fact the Canadian-style multicultural principles which at least partly inform our immigration policies, are adequate for dealing with both religion and religious discrimination in the contemporary globalized environment.

Will Kymlicka (2004) observes that Canadian multiculturalism grew out of specific historical realities, and is thus not necessarily applicable elsewhere (or at least everywhere). While this is undoubtedly true, our relatively open citizenship, immigration, and multicultural regimes still seem to suit the Canadian context. However, we are far too reluctant to resolve (or even to acknowledge) the contradiction between a set of policies that frames religious diversity positively, and a broader society (including policy makers and much of our intellectual elite) that lacks the most basic knowledge required to understand this new and extremely ambiguous feature of our society.

To address this contradiction – and if we do not choose to address it sooner, we will probably be forced to do it later – we might consider the following three recommendations: 1) we could ensure that all Canadian high school students understand the basic features of major religious traditions; 2) we could insist that our journalists, academics, and policy makers are not allowed to neglect the explicitly religious features of social or political issues; and 3) we could continue to discuss the implications of the endurance of religion in the midst of modern industrialized societies (that is, Why, in the societies shaped by the Enlightenment and late capitalism, has religion survived?). The challenges posed by religion in

our era are far more immense than many will acknowledge, but if we respond intelligently and creatively to the new religious landscape, the potential benefits for our civil society are great.

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Notes

1 It has been about four years since the last Census, and two years since Statistics Canada released the results of the Census questions related to religion. The Ethnic Diversity Survey, released in the Fall of 2003, Reginald Bibby's most recent (2002) book, and a number of smaller polls conducted by private companies, have also significantly improved the empirical portrait of religion in Canada.

2 For example, see Swatos (1999).

3 All figures are approximations.

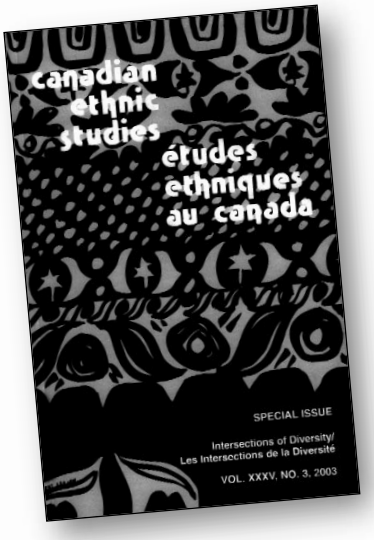
4 This may be part of what some commentators have called the "empire strikes back" phenomenon, in which individuals from regions on the periphery of a given empire migrate to a region closer to the perceived centre of the empire, and begin to influence that region's putatively cohesive culture.

5 It is important to note that the influence of ethnic minorities within Christian churches has not been uniformly "conservative;" on the contrary, it is often the case that relative newcomers – many of whom have had real-life experiences of poverty, marginalization, and in some cases, torture – can spur an individual church or a denomination toward a far more "progressive" stance on matters related to human rights and justice.

6 There are groups in Canada and elsewhere that can also be described as pre- or non-differentiated, that is, as living within a far more "enchanted" and thoroughly religious framework when compared with the broader so-called "secular" mainstream. The Amish Christians and Hassidic Jews are two examples of such communities. However, as I describe in a book on the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship (2000), such worldviews can also be maintained (or "negotiated") from within the dominant culture, and by individuals who are totally indistinguishable from the majority population.

7 See http://www.runnymedetrust.org/publications/pdfs/islamophobia.pdf

8 However, see the website of the Canadian Council on American Islamic Relations for reports and discussions of Islamophobic incidents and tendencies. http://www.cairca.ca/index.php



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This special issue of *Canadian Ethnic Studies* (Vol. XXXV, No. 3, 2003) was guest edited by a team comprised of two researchers (Yvonne Hébert from the Faculty of Education, University of Calgary; and Julia Kwong from the Department of Sociology at the University of Manitoba) and two policy makers (John Biles and Erin Tolley with the Metropolis Project Team based at Citizenship and Immigration Canada). Contributions include ten papers commissioned by the Multiculturalism Program following the 2003 seminar in each of the policy areas explored at the seminar: political processes; housing; labour and training; capital markets; education and (re)training; justice; health; information and knowledge; culture; and social transfers. To order a copy of this journal, please visit **http://www.ss.ucalgary.ca/CES/**