DIASPORIC RELIGIONS IN CANADA:

Opportunities and Challenges

ABSTRACT

Should we focus so highly on the capacity of an individual to contribute to the economy in our understanding of citizenship? While we do participate in the structures of economic life, our purpose is to serve the well-being of families, friends and community. It is the recognition of religious and ethnic communities through policies like multiculturalism which define the practice of freedom, human rights and citizenship.

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With the re-issue of Neil Bissoondath's *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada* (1994, 2002) the public critique of the policy of multiculturalism in Canada has been relaunched. No less significant, the recent publications by Stoffman (2002), Collacott (2002) and Francis (2002) have mounted a sharp critique of Canada's current immigration policies. These publishing events, while formally unrelated in 2002, converge in their implications around a central question concerning the future of Canadian society. What kind of society do Canadians and landed immigrants wish to create together?

For the most part these critics of immigration and multiculturalism argue for a view of citizenship which accords the highest value to autonomous individuals and their capacity to contribute to the economy. The diverse roles citizens play in their family, immediate communities and in the larger society are either unexamined or viewed as private matters. Coming, as I do, from Nova Scotia where going down the road is lamented locally and celebrated in the *Globe and Mail* and *National Post* as the inevitable, if not proper, economic fate of individuals, the convergence of these currents of thought about immigration and multiculturalism raise some very fundamental issues. At the center of those issues is the place of the various communities of attachment in the life of citizens. For my purposes, religious communities will serve as representative of the communal facets of life which critics of multiculturalism and immigration so frequently disparage.

Citizenship provides a primary "marker" of identity in contemporary nation states. To say, "I am Canadian" expresses a whole range of attachments. Denis Lee's poetry for children (1974), for example, celebrates the cadence (1998) in the names we have given to places on our landscape. Names as diverse as Lunenburg, Kamouraska, Temiskaming, Saint Boniface and Victoria stand for our attachments to family, friends, neighbourhood, local polities, economies, the arts, educational institutions and religious communities. These overlapping and integral facets of attachment constitute the fertile earth which nurtures citizenship. In the depth of these attachments, people both converse and contend in the on-going, never ending debates about how to live well as citizens in Canada. To build public policies which undermine and diminish the capacity of citizens to participate in these many facets of attachment is, finally, to undercut the very roots of citizenship itself.

Multicultural policy is founded on the recognition (Taylor, 1994) of individual citizens who are invested with both constitutional and Charter rights and freedoms, not the least of which is the freedom of religion. No less significant, it recognizes that individuals exist within communities whose diverse languages, religions, and cultures warrant public recognition and support. Such recognition has encouraged new immigrants to band together, very often across ethnic lines, to form religious communities and institutions. The result is that Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Muslims, Eastern Orthodox, Mennonites, Coptics to name only a few have joined together to create places for worship and social life. Religious communities have provided primary support for new immigrants as they adjust to life in Canada. Religious communities have created regional and national associations to support their local religious institutions and communities. In addition they participate in international religious organizations and have maintained strong connections with religious communities in the historic homelands of their religion.

Were this the eighteenth or nineteenth century, the patterns of religious institution and community would include French and Irish Catholics, Scotch Presbyterians, English Methodists, German

Lutherans, and Anabaptists from many parts of Europe (Bruckner, 1993; O'Toole, 1996). As these immigrants left their homelands, they formed "ethnic" and religious communities, built churches, schools and economies in their new country. The formed regional and ultimately national and international religious organizations. They looked to homelands for priests, pastors and teachers. Community building centered on religious institutions. Family and social life took on its form and shape as did the politics of the community based on the shared convictions of religious life. Belief and belonging in the Canadian landscape, as O'Toole suggests, seemed to be one and the same.

Nonetheless, Canadian colonial and post-colonial history was a story of religious and ethnic difference. It told of contention between Roman Catholic and Protestant ethnicities whose memories of old world religious battles and hatreds endured. Even more important, the history told the story of religious freedom expressed in constitutional accommodations to religious/ethnic difference and patterns of interdenominational cooperation in the settlement of the West. It was precisely the recognition of difference between Roman Catholic and Protestant, French and English which permitted the emergence of those intimations of citizenship which were defined by their capacity to incorporate minorities whose religious attachments were different from those of the majority in French and English Canada. The odds against such intimations were enormous. Mimicking British imperialism, Canada's political leadership developed policies to assimilate native peoples, French Canadians, Métis and to exclude South Asian and Chinese peoples. Such policies proved to be both a tragedy and a failure.

Canadians forget their history at their own risk. The names of the religions taking root in Canada in the twenty-first century are different from those in the nineteenth. It is now Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs who are, or have been, the immigrants building religious and community institutions. It is remarkable how consistent the patterns of citizenship building recur. While women and men participate in the structures of economic life, they do so *for* purposes which serve the well-being of families, friends, a whole range of communities and associations. It is those intersecting communities of attachment which shape the identities of Canadian citizenship in our time. It is then the recognition of religious and ethnic communities through policies like multiculturalism which define the practice of freedom, human rights and, in the broadest sense, what being Canadian is becoming.

If imperialism brought the policies of assimilation down upon minority populations in the nineteenth century, what are the kind of barriers to the integrative meaning of citizenship which we have just outlined? The ideological notion corresponding to imperialist assimilation is the hegemony of the secular worldview. Scholars have come to recognize that secularization doesn't work for interpreting post-industrial societies. Yet, the dominant ideology of governments, media and the arts appears to hold the view that only in a secular society can freedom and democracy flourish. Within such secularist views, religious faith and religious communities are often disparaged and ridiculed – perhaps the most telling form of the irrationality and intolerance of the secular worldview. The fallacy of such a view is born out by the historic role of religious diversity in Canada and the persistence of religious institutions and convictions worldwide. The pervasiveness of the secular ideology is measured by who and what it chooses to exclude and in this respect religions have become one of the most frequently excluded expressions of difference in Canadian society. That this negatively effects the Muslim, Jew, Christian, Hindu, and Sikh is simply a fact.

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Canadian society has never incorporated the constitutional view of the separation of religion and the state. Nor has it imitated in its constitutions and Charter the British model of an established church. In the absence of both of those options, recognition of the historic contribution of members of churches and synagogues to the formation of Canadian society and its public institutions from health care, education and the polity, (O'Toole, 1996) opens up for view the authentic precedents on which we can build the future of a multicultural Canadian society. The bedrock of that future may be illustrated in how religious diversity in this country is given authentic recognition. As the diversity of ethnic communities and their religious institutions flourish, they will contribute to the on-going debates about our collective future and our shared citizenship. In this respect, Ziauddin Sardar, a Muslim and culture critic, and Meryl Wyn Davies call for an authentic pluralism:

> Pluralism is not the acceptance of tradition as quaint exotica in private manifestations of clothing, cooking and at forms or seasonal entertainment.... Plurality is acknowledging the existence of other axioms and values that cherish freedom, justice, equity and much more, *as different modes of operation, within a different construction of life ways. Plurality is accepting that these life ways can contribute constructively to the consensus of a heterogeneous community.* (Sarder and Davies, 1990:253, emphasis mine).

Sardar and Davies, I would argue, are pressing for a view of citizenship which reflects the very best of the historic ideals of Canadian citizenship and the potential inherent in Canadian Multiculturalism.

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