

Is There a Dark Side to Multiculturalism?

This article first appeared in the Summer of 1994 in the pages of this magazine, back when it was called *Humanist in Canada*. Dr. Hutcheon's thoughts and observations are just as relevant today as they were 23 years ago, perhaps even more so, as the forces of fragmentation that she foresaw become more evident. —Ed.

Pat Duffy Hutcheon

Pointing out the dangers of multiculturalism in Canada today is like criticizing motherhood in a conversation with Mother Teresa. Nevertheless, when overpopulation begins to emerge as the foremost threat to the survival of life on earth, that criticism may well be warranted. A similar argument might be presented against the well-intentioned promotion of ethnicity *anywhere* today in a world being wracked by tribal violence – and *especially* in a country like Canada where, even now, the center is just barely holding against the forces of fragmentation.

Population explosion and tribalism! No one knowingly would seek these as goals. But neither scourge appears full-blown from the head of Zeus. Countries and peoples are propelled step by step towards these cruel ends – all too often in the search for some holy grail with the status of motherhood. One such unchallengeable ideal may well be the peculiarly Canadian celebration of ethnicity which we call 'multiculturalism.'

By their very nature holy grails are undefinable. And because they are ambiguous they can be dangerous. So it is with multiculturalism as the goal of government policy and pressure-group action. In fact, multiculturalism in Canada today might be compared to a jutting point of ice in the North Atlantic. Like the tip of an iceberg, this policy is beautiful as a distant mirage but potentially deadly in its real-life consequences. Perhaps this explains why the exact nature and predictable effects of multicultur-

alism are so seldom discussed by those who extol it.

For example, we need to know whether those who use the term are envisioning some sort of loose aggregate of independent communities sharing nothing but a common geographic base. Or are they referring merely to a pluralist culture of the type best illustrated by the immigrant societies of America? In the early seventies, when this issue first became popular in Canadian academic circles, there was another term than 'multicultural' commonly used. It was 'intercultural.' It implied a goal quite different from that denoted by the term which eventually won acceptance. To promote *intercultural* communication is to favor the breaking down of 'in-group' barriers – and the testing of new ways of doing things – as all citizens (longtime as well as new) are nourished by an ever-expanding general culture.

So, in our concern to make Canada safe *for* and *from* our shared ethnicities, we need to decide whether we are committed to *multiculturalism* or *interculturalism*. Only in the first case would we aim for a multiplicity of relatively isolated, homogeneous cultural enclaves of the kind that current policy seems to be encouraging. In the second case, there is one major culture with subcultural groupings feeding into it, and being, in turn, nourished by it. There is a crucial difference between these two models. The first situation emphasizes the intact transmission of traditional beliefs and customs

– resulting inevitably in resistance to change and intolerance of diversity within the protected ‘in-group.’ The second situation encourages the sort of cultural evolution that has been typical of Canadian society since its inception.

A successful pluralist culture is one that is continuously enriched and altered by innovation from within, and by the subcultures being carried into it by immigrants. However, the carriers of that culture are members of *only one society*, in the institutions of which all members, old and new, participate and make their contributions. Granted, it is a society with a great deal of mobility: social, geographic, and across subcultures. And, like any society undergoing rapid and continuous social change, it is susceptible to the chaos of wholesale cultural breakdown. That is why the continuity provided by its institutions – whether spiritual, economic, educational, judicial or political – is so essential. A country’s institutions reflect the core of values or ideals representing the cultural glue needed to hold its people together. And it is why any weakening of Canada’s central institutions, in the name of multiculturalism, poses a threat to all of us.

Where we have merely an aggregate of ethnic subcultures inhabiting a single geographic area there are few, if any, shared institutions. This makes it impossible to protect the long-term welfare of ‘the commons.’ The cultural groupings are isolated by the archaic boundaries of tribalism. Such boundaries are marked by blood lines, distinctive language preventing effective ‘out-group’ communication, a romanticized heritage of grievances against neighboring groups, and immutable religious beliefs and rituals. In the tribal situation *collective* rights are recognized as paramount. There are no meaningful limitations at the societal level on the operation of cultural mores introduced to

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the country by incoming groups, even when these include obsolete gender and work roles. Freedom for the *individuals* within group boundaries, however, is another matter entirely.

In fact, in the extreme multicultural ‘ideal type’ exemplified by Canada’s Hutterite colonies, it is clearly seen that the two freedoms are antithetical. The more that freedom is granted to subcultural en-

claves to preserve an unchanging way of life, the more the freedom of the individual member is necessarily restricted. There is therefore a world of difference between a pluralist culture within one integrated society and a collection of independent, ethnically defined communities in uneasy geographic cohabitation. The integrated pluralist society emphasizes and values individuality, along with joint responsibility for the commons. The tribal enclave, on the other hand, is concerned with transmitting its culture intact to succeeding generations. We need to decide which form of society we really want. The first represents a Canadian reality out of which dreams can well be made; the second is the stuff of Balkan nightmares.

A useful metaphor for the entrance of immigrant subcultures to the larger cultural flow is the mountain river joined and enriched by numerous streams, as it carves its way toward the plain. However, the situation implied by many of the proponents of multiculturalism is something else entirely. It brings to mind a landscape of stagnant pools on a volcanic plain: pools that periodically erupt into jets of steam and molten debris.

This is the vision of tribalism. It represents the dark underbelly of multiculturalism. There is a potential for tribalism wherever multiculturalism is taken to mean the preservation of a multiplicity of static subcultures. We may come to realize, too late, that in our uncritical support

for a misbegotten and confused multiculturalism we have fostered a level of intolerance and intergroup violence hitherto unknown in Canada.

Perhaps the most telling indictment of multiculturalism as a goal is that it cannot work! For cultures are in fact like rivers, and like life itself, they must evolve or die. The richest source of evolutionary adaptation and change, for human culture, is the disciplined pursuit of knowledge. Indeed, science is the only human endeavour with a self-correcting mechanism at its very core. Another innovative source is art. Aesthetic productions become powerful shapers of the values and habits that promote change. The third great source of revitalization for any particular country is the periodic entry of immigrants bringing with them new ways of doing things. All three of these vital sources of change are in jeopardy wherever tribalism reigns.

The image of the mountain river can help us to understand the concept of a pluralist, immigrant culture: the way of life of a society which is continuously being enriched by new tested knowledge and creative visions, and by new members as they interact with those whose ancestors came before. But this enrichment requires open communication and the casting off of old tribal grievances and biases. It demands that we allow only the most fruitful and workable of the cultural attributes from the homeland to survive in the new. That cannot happen if we continue to promote tribalistic versions of multiculturalism as a goal for Canada: versions which dictate that every religious ritual and clan custom of every newcomer must be retained intact.

It cannot happen because an evolving pluralist culture requires interaction and mutual

respect and willingness to learn on the part of newcomer and established citizen alike. Building fences hurts both groups, for cultural isolation brings stagnation and racist backlash. And it brings the danger of wholesale cultural breakdown for the separated group whenever the fences are breached. Established inhabitants have to experience immigrants as people with something of value to offer. On the other hand, immigrants must recognize and respect the previous existence of a powerful, ongoing culture – that river into which they are carrying their offerings, and from which they have much to gain.

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Always, the key to a vibrant, evolving culture is *interaction*. It implies an interaction of the new with the great flow of ideas and customs that makes up the receiving culture. Government policy must always be aimed at *integrating* newcomers into the society which they have chosen to enter. It must not function to perpetuate ethnic/religious

divisions. Tax revenues should never be used to sustain ancient tribal barriers to ‘out-group’ communication. Integration into the host society requires that immigrants understand, from the moment of application for entry, that they will be expected to become proficient in either English or French. The reason for this fundamental requirement is simple and obvious. English and French are the languages of work and government in Canada.

However, this does not imply enforced *assimilation*. Newcomers should, at the same time, be encouraged to practice, and share with neighbors, the family customs which contribute to the richness of that unique personal identity being offered to the cultural mix of their new

country. In the neighborhood and workplace, this cultural sharing is bound to be a two-way street. This is the way that cultural evolution occurs at the grassroots level.

There is indeed a precious core of values defining what it means to be Canadian today. That core has many parts. It comprises those ideals and principles underlying our democratic institutions: the responsible parliamentary system of government; the secret ballot; equality of opportunity and equality before the law; freedom of ideas; freedom of spiritual belief, the concept of collective responsibility for the weak and vulnerable; our commitment to internationalism; respect for the rule of law and for scientific inquiry; and our tolerance of diversity. Our freedoms are not unlimited, however. Newcomers should be aware that, although we do not limit *ideas*, there are certain *behaviors* which we will not tolerate, regardless of whether or not these involve customs sanctioned by religion.

It has been argued that, because we Canadians have never fully achieved our aspirations, we have no right to demand adherence by newcomers. But, the fact that our value core does indeed represent ideals rather than the exact nature of our current reality does not undermine its validity nor its significance in shaping our past and directing our joint future.

In fact, most new Canadians have chosen to come to Canada precisely *because* of their perceptions of what our culture, as a whole, represents. The attribute most often mentioned is our internationalist outlook: an outlook precisely opposite to that fostered in the sheltered subcultural enclave. Most immigrants do not want a replica of what they left behind. Least of all do most of them desire a re-playing, in a new setting, of the old religious conflicts, caste rules and blood feuds that they were trying to escape.

Rather than devoting scarce resources to the inherently fragmenting goal of multiculturalism, we Canadians would be well advised to focus on pioneering an integrative vision of humanity which could serve as an example for the world. All of the world's great religions and philosophies could be mined for their spiritual core. They could contribute the foundation for a

world view capable of uniting rather than dividing human beings. How about the Golden Rule of Confucius; the Right Way of the Buddha; the theological pluralism of ancient Hinduism; the Classical Greek concern for freedom and democracy; the Ten Commandments of the Jews; the Taoist focus on unity and interdependence within nature; Jesus' teachings on simple human kindness and love for one's neighbors; Mohammed's emphasis on honesty and social obligation; the work ethic of Saint Benedict; Guru Nanak's devotion to equality and fellowship; Albert Schweitzer's 'reverence for life' and his concept of human responsibility for the survival of that stream of life? All this could be coupled with the unfettered intellectual curiosity and skeptical inquiry method of the scientific humanist.

Some such new, *global* source and justification for spirituality is long overdue, and what more appropriate conditions could there be for its emergence than those provided by the immigrant pluralist Canadian culture? Survival in the twenty-first century will demand the replacement of tribally based religions emphasizing exclusiveness with a spirituality based on *shared membership* in the community of humanity. We need a spirituality that celebrates our common human origin and joint responsibility for our planet: one that welcomes the evidence of science and the inspiration of art. We need a planetary spiritual vision to replace the icons of the tribes. Surely the pursuit of such a vision is far more noble and timely and essentially Canadian than is our popular but potentially dangerous allegiance to an undefined multiculturalism! •

The late Pat Duffy Hutcheon (1926-2010) was a writer, sociologist and educator with broad experience both in teaching at all levels of the public school and university system, and in policy-oriented research. After retirement, she taught courses in the sociology of education and early-childhood education at the University of Regina and the University of British Columbia, as well as serving as a research advisor to the Health Promotion Branch of the Canadian Department of Health and Welfare and as a director of the Vanier Institute of the Family.