

Hope and Hype: Religion, Secularism and Post-Secularism in Canada and Beyond

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It might surprise you that a great many Canadians are following the American electoral circus. You might well marvel at how bored we must be in Canada that we actually pay attention to the bizarre twists and turns of the Republican nomination race.

I know – it's pretty weird, but on the whole Canadians are a pretty internationally-oriented group, which probably explains why about 53% of us have passports whereas only about 23% of Americans do. Plus, we're fascinated by you, the same way you might be fascinated by a traffic accident or the world's tallest building, fastest computer or brightest flashlight.

There is a political theorist named Benedict Anderson who has a great deal to say about what we might call the "notion of a nation." He argues that in order for people in places as different as, say, Portland and Tallahassee, or Nanaimo and Quebec City to feel like they belong to the same national project, they need to participate in a grand act of imagination. So, he refers to the "imagined community" – such a term captures well the profound act of imagination necessary to speak of the American, or German, or Canadian people as a people.

In our imagined national communities – especially during times of crisis – other imagined communities loom large. Those of you who remember the Cold War are all familiar with the symbolic, the imagined, nature of the Soviet Union as a kind of stark backdrop, against which the American project could unfold, the noise against which your music would sound beautiful.

Since the dawn of the so-called War on Terror, other communities have been imagined, framed, as the other. I remember being in New York exactly a year after 9/11, standing in front of the wooden fence around ground zero, and seeing that someone had written, in large letters, Why Saddam, why? One can only marvel at such projections – but of course, Cold War understandings of what the Soviets wanted were also equally odd in retrospect.

In Canada, the United States is our great projection screen. Indeed, in survey after survey, Canadians proudly claim to be different than you, regardless of how much or little they know about you.

My sense is that when it comes to American perceptions of Canada, it takes one of three forms:

-there are those of you who look at what is happening in your own country around gay and lesbian rights, health care, gun control, the religious right, and see Canada as a beacon of hope

-then there are those of you who look at what is happening in Canada, with some of the shortcomings of our universal health care system, with our lightweight military, with our weird attachment to the Queen, with our fairly high taxes, and who think that things are horrible in Canada; for you perhaps Canada is an object lesson in what can go wrong

-and then there are those of you who simply don't look at Canada at all – who see us as being about as interesting and relevant as the Belgians, the pool cleaner, the guy who scrapes gum off the floor of the gym

But one might ask, why should you care about us? We are small, you are big. When you want something from us, like our water, our wood, our oil, our hockey players, or our comedians, you simply buy it. Personally, I think that's quite polite.

However, I would bet that when most Unitarian Americans and other liberal Americans think about Canada at all, you think happy thoughts about two things: Canadian healthcare and Canadian multiculturalism.

Canadians expect healthcare to be free, efficient and effective in the same way that Canadians and Americans expect public elementary schools to be paid for by the state and basically clean water to flow from public drinking fountains.

When you go into your local elementary school you expect the lights to work. That's the same way a Canadian feels about having their appendix taken out, their cancer treated, and their prostate checked. It's not exactly free, but the state is paying for it... somehow.

Again, it's not perfect, but it's working pretty well, and as such there's virtually no credible political voice calling for a private health system in Canada. Every time someone even clears their throat in public to argue for an American-style health system, people look at them like they've just sustained a head injury.

I'm not sure a Canadian system would float here, though I was also sure that the TV series Survivor would be cancelled mid-way through season one. There are lots of reasons our health model probably wouldn't work here: the political culture is different, your insurance companies are more powerful than ours, your doctors expect to make more money than ours, and so on.

But this morning I want to look at the other thing some Americans seem to like about Canada – our approach to cultural diversity. And since this is church, I want to reflect on the way the Canadian approach to diversity shapes the way we deal with religion. After all, and especially since 9-11, it is the management of religious diversity that has attracted all of the attention of so many Americans, Canadians and Europeans.

Like our approach to healthcare, the Canadian approach to religion is distinctive, and has its own pitfalls.

I want to reflect on it, though, in case it might shed some light both on Canada and on the options available to you.

In brief, I want to argue that multiculturalism and secularism arose to solve a certain set of problems in Canada, and have now become problems that need solving.

In order to move ahead, however, I need to make some general comments about the two periods that predated the secular multicultural era in Canada. I offer these comments not just as a means of familiarizing you with the cultural terrain of Canada but also because this may be instructive to some of you who have heard positive things about our approach, and who hope similar changes might take root in your society.

Transplanting Christianity

Historians of religion think of the first phase of Canadian religious history, from the arrival of the first Europeans until roughly Confederation of 1867 as the period of the transplanting of European colonial religions and cultures.

Both the British and the French settlers assumed they would transplant their values and institutions and religions to a land they thought – stupidly – was *terra nullius*, an unoccupied space. The first approach lasted for a couple hundred years and was based upon an ideology which assumed the almost complete overlap between the interests of the state and the two dominant forms of Christianity in Canada: Roman Catholicism in Quebec and the Anglican Church elsewhere.

There has never been the kind of “separation of church and state” in Canada that there has been in the US. Many Canadians will tell you that our society also separates church and state, but that’s just because they watch a lot of American TV, like Law and Order.

While there was never a separation, there was also never a complete formal establishment of Anglicanism or Roman Catholicism, either. Of course, some Anglicans and Catholics did try to create virtual theocracies here, but for reasons I can’t go into this morning, it never really happened in any complete sense.

What did happen, however, was that the Catholics in Quebec and the Anglicans in the rest of the country enjoyed a kind of informal privilege – financially and politically. 1/7th of “crown lands,” for example, were called “the clergy reserves,” meaning they were reserved for the use and profit of the Anglican Church.

In English Canada, confederation in 1867 kind of “solved” the problems of the first form of church-state relations in the sense that the formal documents that made Canada a (kind of) independent country, did not guarantee the Anglican Church the (kind of) semi-established powers it once had.

The Shadow Establishment

Confederation in 1867 ushered in the second period of history, which we call the shadow establishment – no longer would the Anglican Church have official almost-established privileges, but clearly, in English Canada, Christian churches were integrally and almost seamlessly involved in the broader national project, and were helped in a variety of ways by the state.

Some of you have heard the Canadian “mosaic” model contrasted with the American “melting-pot” model. Actually, for most of Canadian history we were an “Anglo-conformist” melting pot, but we just accepted that if certain odd – though mostly still Christian -- ethnic folks were willing to abide by our largely Anglo-Protestant rules, and were willing to take lousy jobs or cultivate the land in far flung regions of the country so that we could keep the Americans out, the Aborigines on the margins, and the money flowing from the West to the East, then hey, what the heck - those ethnic folks would be allowed to have a kind of junior status in the national project.

Within this Anglo-conformist social structure, the churches had special and largely unquestioned access to political power.

This approach helped to make peace between Protestants and Catholics, helped to keep Quebec sort-of happy, helped to bind Canada into a coherent national project, and helped to reduce the tensions among different Protestant denominations. However, a few things happened to call this shadow establishment arrangement into question (and a few are):

- the rise in Europe and then North America of the theories of Freud, Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Darwin and Nietzsche, all of which weakened the broad plausibility of a certain form of Christianity
- the secular state became more and more capable of doing more and more for citizens
- the rapid social and technological change occurring in society in the 20th century, including the gradual improvement in women’s rights

Secular Canada

And so around the 1960s, we entered the third or secularist phase of Canadian religious history that brought with it, the beginning of the sexual revolution, the civil rights movement – so many of the positive things we associate with Canada are rooted in the cultural revolutions of the 1960’s. Obviously, similar changes were underway in the United States and England.

After the 1960s in Canada, both within and outside of Quebec, the shadow establishment was in retreat as the hippies, the scientists, the feminists, the liberal Christians and the non-Christians began to stand up and assert their interests. I think of it as a kind of “revenge of the nerds” situation, in which suddenly the folks who had once been told to mind their manners under the protection of the shadow establishment were demanding liberation, and then they were joined by baby boomers and, basically, it was game over for the shadow establishment.

Obviously, very few people stopped believing in God, and most didn’t even stop identifying as members

of such-and-such a denomination, but a new arrangement, a new religious status quo, began to take shape in the 1960s, and like all others before it, it promoted the notion that the one it was replacing was shallow, barbaric.

I'd like to suggest that in Canada the new 1960s ideology had two pillars – the first was secularism and the second was multiculturalism, and both sought to resolve the problems inherent in the previous shadow establishment era, and in so doing, to set out a new map for the future.

Secularism is not just the theory that the world, or some part of it, is becoming more and more secular on both institutional and personal levels. Rather, it's an ideology that suggests that such a transformation is good, and is part of the gradual progressive unfolding of truth and justice in the world.

Secularism – of course – is rooted in the promises and hopes of the Enlightenment tradition, and it's pretty clear which problems it solved – it sought to cut out any privileges that might be enjoyed by the shadow establishment, and it sought in so doing to include people from all religious backgrounds in society. I'll return to secularism in a moment.

Canadian multiculturalism is a far younger concept and political agenda than secularism. – it emerged as Prime Minister Trudeau's formal policy in 1971. The official policy and the public debate about the official policy are distinct, but in round-about terms, multiculturalism purports to promote a society in which all individuals and cultures will be valued and protected and will have equal access to the public arena. Contrary to conservative caricatures, it does not encourage people to remain in ethnic or religious "ghettoes," but rather aims to reduce their barriers to full participation in the broader society.

This concept, this policy direction, has become a pivotal part of the Canadian story – it's a major feature of the Canadian "brand," so to speak. If you travel abroad and find yourself annoyed by a Canadian, she or he is probably bragging about multiculturalism or the way our hockey team beat the Americans in the last Olympics.

Multiculturalism as a policy, or as a way of thinking about diversity, tends to take a pretty clumsy approach to religion. Indeed, all of the federal and provincial government policies about multiculturalism say really nice things about how Canadians should view religious diversity positively; and all of the Canadian laws on diversity similarly forbid discrimination and other kinds of meanness on the basis of religion.

Before I look critically at the way multiculturalism deals with religion, let me reflect on secularism.

The key claim of secularism was that we should and could make the public arena neutral – this was, in theory, supposed to create a level playing field for everyone. Once upon a time, at the dawn of this third phase in Canadian religious history, it seemed appropriate to ask people entering the public sphere to "leave their religion at the door" so to speak and to make their claims based on this so-called publicly accessible rational secular language.

However, the basic message that is sent to religious people is that when it comes time for them to

articulate these arguments at city hall, or in courts of law, or in the media, they need to find other reasons to justify their actual motivations. Indeed, if you want your arguments to be trivialized and mocked in Canada, just try saying that you feel a particular policy or social change is undesirable because you are deeply attached to a particular religious view.

In other words, we require religious people at least to misrepresent themselves, or only partially represent themselves when making public claims.

The problem here is that this particular way of organizing a society places a heavy burden on deeply religious people.

I want to suggest that while the third secular phase of Canadian religious history solved some of the problems of the previous shadow establishment phase it now faces a dilemma that appears likely to signal its demise. The secularism we adopted for our public spheres from (roughly) the 1960s assumed that people would get less and less religious over time, and also that inasmuch as people were religious, they'd keep it in the private sphere.

This has worked out in some ways, since mainline institutional religion – certainly institutional liberal Christianity – in Canada is now in decline, whereas conservative forms of Christianity, non-Christian religions, and a more post-institutional orientation toward “spirituality” have become more common.

However, some people feel for philosophical and political reasons that like all ideologies, secularism, which hoped to free us all from the narrowness of religion has become its own form of narrowness.

As well, conservative forms of Christianity in Canada continue to be strong – there aren't as many of them (about 10% of the Canadian population) as there are in the United States (about 30-40%), but they are still a force to be reckoned with. Finally, and more significantly, the most cursory glance at Canadian newspapers will tell you that the expectation that secularism would be compelling to people around the world has definitely not turned out to be true.

During the roughly hundred years of the shadow establishment period, Canada had a racially-based, even racist immigration system. About a decade after the beginning of the secular Canada period (from roughly 1960 on), Canada had, like the US, re-designed its immigration policies dramatically, and this led to dramatic increases in the number of non-Europeans and non-Christians in Canada. The Statistics Canada numbers reflect the challenges faced by secularism:

- By 2017, membership in the Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh communities will likely increase by 145%, 92% and 72% respectively compared to their 2001 Census totals.

- By 2031 the “visible minority” populations in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal are likely to reach 63%, 59%, and 31% of the total populations of these cities, respectively;

- By 2031, roughly 14% of Canadians will be non-Christian, and approximately one half of these non-Christians will be Muslims (so, 7-8% of Canada by 2031 will likely be Muslim).

Secularism purported to free people from strictures; this was the problem it solved. It didn't anticipate that Canada would be home to so many highly educated, well rooted, fiercely loyal, and deeply religious people who would, or might, wish to have their religious claims respected in the public arena as religious claims. Like all other ideologies, it sought to provide a complete horizon of meaning. It has succeeded for many people; for others, it has been a failure; for me it has been a mixed blessing.

Earlier I mentioned that virtually all policies and documents related to multiculturalism – at the federal, provincial, or municipal level – make some passing and positive reference to religious diversity as one form of diversity that is affirmed within a multicultural mosaic. However, many people want to feel good about having a fellow with a turban on stage, cutting ribbons or policing our streets – that's all good, but they don't want to hear about Sikhism as a religious tradition. In effect, multicultural policy refers quite kindly to all kinds of diversity, but deals almost exclusively with racial and ethnic forms of diversity.

This is largely because our multiculturalism is a *secular multiculturalism*, which has framed religion as a problem, as divisive, as private, as too complicated to engage publicly. And so, we pride ourselves on embracing multiculturalism in Canada, and we promote it shamelessly abroad, and yet we get antsy if someone's expression of diversity is religiously deep or explicit. Again, the secular era solved a lot of problems, but it left unresolved the problem of religion – its endurance, its ferocity, its embeddedness in the immigrant cultures our society depends on.

Canadian society is still trying to determine if it will move in the direction of what some call open secularism or if it will continue to move toward closed secularism. At present, the record in Canada is mixed. In Quebec, which even our prime minister refers to as its own nation within the nation, the tide has turned dramatically against allowing religion in the public arena and all manner of restrictions are being imposed on explicitly religious people – especially Muslims. In this sense, Quebec is very much like France and the Netherlands, not just in the fact that they dress better talk funny and smoke more, but in the sense that they are feeling a collective need to assert a singular cultural identity, and to keep out those they feel threaten it.

Elsewhere, like in the major cities of Toronto, Vancouver, Ottawa and Calgary, there is much more openness to accommodating religious difference. In these cities, people generally opt for what Canadians call "open secularism." Let me close by reflecting on what this might look like, and then you can reflect on whether or not there might be anything of interest in it for you.

Open secularism is a way of organizing a society in which religion is allowed more fully into the public arena.

It requires the state and society to share the burden of translation with religious people. This will not mean that religious claims will trump all other claims, or force us to roll back progressive political social policies we enjoy in Canada.

This is not an argument for relativism or a theocracy. Not at all. However, it seems to me that as long as

people are not living in gross violation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (our sacred text, so to speak), they ought to be able at least to argue that their religious claims should be heard and engaged – as religious claims – in the public arena, without discrimination.

Again, this won't mean their claims will hold sway, and it might make the public arena louder, at times more wingy, and a lot more conflictual.

But so what? Do we have an option? Closed secularism might seem to work for the French or the Dutch, but there isn't much evidence to suggest that we are in their position.

The problems associated with any ideology only become evident when those people who are rendered invisible by the ideology stand up and refuse to be invisible any more. The same thing happened at the end of the first quasi-establishment phase of Canadian church-state relations (1867). And then the same thing happened at the end of the second phase of Canadian church-state relations (1960).

And now, in the twilight years of the secular era (the final phase of which probably began on September 11, 2001), as we consider what a post-secular multicultural Canada might look like – some of those people, those trouble-people, those orthodox Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and others, are now asking or may justifiably ask in the near future to be let back into the public arena, but this time as Muslims, as Christians, as Hindus, not merely as disembodied and de-religionized secular "citizens."

This does not mean that a Canada characterized by open secularism is heading for some kind of theocracy; not at all. People and societies do draw lines – that's what it means to be a person or a society. However, a post-secular era may well mean we will need to put aside the bossy ideological fantasies that have so far governed the secular period and that no longer provide an adequate horizon of meaning for our common future.

So, looking back to the beginning of the sermon....

I mentioned that while some American liberals may be attracted to Canadian multiculturalism and open secularism as models for how you might deal with some of the challenges presented by religious diversity, our models have their own genealogy that means they cannot be transplanted easily.

Our approaches arose to solve our problems. To the extent that Canadians and Americans share some of those problems, however, our solutions might be of some use as we all try to think of religious diversity not just as a challenge to liberal societies, but also as an opportunity.