

# Does reasonable accommodation succeed in protecting tolerance and diversity?

I would like to make four distinctions and three observations.

## DISTINCTIONS

### 1. Immigrant multiculturalism is different from indigenous multiculturalism

India is not an immigrant society, but it is a breathtakingly multicultural country. Canada's indigenous peoples contribute to its cultural pluralism, but, significantly, we do not normally think of them as part of the country's multicultural mosaic. The nature of the social and political debate is quite different according to the category in which a given group is placed. In most cases, in an immigrant society, multiculturalism is a transitional phenomenon for each incoming immigrant population, en route to either assimilation or integration (see point 3 below); the factors leading to assimilation or integration in the case of indigenous multiculturalism arise—not out of the process of immigration, obviously—but out of other social, demographic, and economic forces, such as industrialization, urbanization, or state policy.

Seeking to re-categorize an indigenous community as an immigrant community is a strategy sometimes used by dominant groups to undermine the status of the minority; hard-line Sinhalese nationalists will argue that the Tamils of Sri Lanka are not, properly understood,

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an indigenous people, even though the Jaffna Tamils have made their home in Sri Lanka since the 14th century. They sometimes contend that the Sri Lankan Tamils have a place they can go back to—Tamil Nadu, for example, in southern India—whereas the Sinhalese have no place but their island to call home.

### 2. Rural multiculturalism is different from urban multiculturalism

The capacity of a distinct but relatively small cultural community to maintain itself over time is greatly enhanced by isolation. Even if such a community shares a common language with the majority society, it can preserve itself over generations if it is capable of living apart in a rural environment. It is much more difficult, although not impossible, to do this in the city. The incessant social transactions of urban living tend to draw young people away from their cultural roots and corrode the distinctive cultural forms that sustain the identity of the minority community. The Amish of Pennsylvania and the Mennonites of Waterloo County have been able to preserve their distinctive life and institutions for generations. What this suggests is that

the look, feel, and reality of multiculturalism in 19th-century Canada, which was then a country of farms and villages, were very different from the texture of multiculturalism in the 21st century, when 80 percent of Canada's population is urban.

### 3. Integration is different from assimilation, although not so different as one might think

Presumably, we use the term “assimilation” when we assume the receiving society is not altered by the encounter with a new incoming cultural group; “integration,” when it is believed that the receiving society itself is changed by the impact of new cultural and linguistic forces within the society.

If the receiving society is open or uncertain of itself, the process will lead ultimately to integration. This means that the receiving society, as well as the immigrating communities, will be changed in the course of the transaction.

If the receiving society is closed or ideologically or culturally monolithic, the process will lead to either assimilation or exclusion. This means that the receiving society will be relatively little altered in the transaction.

In almost all cases, by the fourth generation or so, the cultural identity distinguishing a particular group will have been largely transformed into either assimilation or integration.

### 4. Multiculturalism is different from multinationalism

Historically, multiculturalism has been a point of friction between English-speaking and French-speaking Canadians. French-speaking Canadians, and, more specifically, francophone Québécois, have resisted the Anglo inclination to lump francophones in with other ethnocultural groups. This is because they see themselves—and are in fact—a self-sus-

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taining national community with a full set of institutions and autonomous practices, not a cultural/linguistic minority within a larger national community. Aboriginal people, too, given their indigeneity, fit more readily into the national than into the multicultural narrative, even though their autonomous institutional networks are far less fully articulated than those of the francophone Québécois. So Canada is not just a multicultural society, but some kind of bi-national or multi-national country. Multiculturalism exists *within* each of Canada's two major linguistic communities.

## OBSERVATIONS

### 1. The virtues of irresolution

For a country in the multicultural business, there are distinct advantages in not having a founding myth, a distinctive creed, or a cohesive national ideology. Largely, I think, because of the country's English-French reality, Canada has never really been able to give a good, coherent account of itself, of what it is and what it stands for, except in the most general terms. This has meant that there has been a kind of porousness in our national story—open or indeterminate spaces within which different lives and experience can fit. Toleration, accommodation, adaptation, adjustment—these are impulses that are shot through the Canadian fabric, and they have meant that Canada's immigration experience—which has been going on, after all, for centuries—has been more about integration than assimilation, more about the mutual give and take that changes all parties in the relationship.

### 2. Time as a resource in managing diversity

There is a natural human desire to get things clear and to resolve complex human situations one way or the other, but often this impulse is mistaken. Some things are genuinely better left unsaid and undone. People don't normally accommodate themselves to new and

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unfamiliar situations or to new people all at once; it takes time. So it is, at least in part, with multiculturalism; each new community works its way into the national fabric over time, and the country is incrementally changed as a consequence. This process has profoundly shaped Canadian society over the generations; indeed, there are few things that have affected it more.

### 3. The "values" issue

This is a complex issue. If multiculturalism is to mean something more than folklore, then it must surely include differentiation in values. Yet if there is not a common substratum of shared principles and values, the society is surely heading for trouble. Monoculturalism in some sense needs to underlie multiculturalism. But in what sense?

First of all, one needs to recognize that the values and aspirations of an individual and of a society often evolve over time; they are not always fixed and immutable, even though it is comforting to think so. It would be difficult to argue that Canadians' understanding of homosexuality or of the proper treatment of Aboriginal people has remained unchanged over recent decades. Once one humbles oneself before the powerful transformative capacity of human society and culture, it is possible to look at multiculturalism in a somewhat different light. Instead of its seeming to challenge existing and implicitly immutable domestic values and belief systems, it can be seen to offer the possibility of dialogue and mutual learning. If we accept the hypothesis that there are things we don't know and ways of conducting the business of human life that may be as good

as—or even better than—what we are familiar with, a considerable potential for human growth is released, and the diversity of cultures and ways of life can be not just tolerated, but celebrated for what it can contribute to the common good. What do we mean when we say that Canada's immigrant experience has made the country a better place? It has to mean more than good Chinese food and reggae music; it must also mean that the country has become something good that it wouldn't have become without immigration and without the leavening impact of cultural pluralism.

Yet it would be wrong to conclude that all values are created equal in a swamp of relativism. Canadians are committed to liberal democracy, the rule of law, and the respect of persons. These are not optional values that we can take up or set aside at will; they—and other principles like them—constitute the foundation of our life together. Working creatively at the frictional interface between what is foundational and what is not is a task that confronts each succeeding generation in a multicultural society. 

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