

Multiculturalism: liberal or communitarian

The Cranky Professor

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We're all multiculturalists now. The only remaining question is whether we will be liberal multiculturalists or communitarian.

The single-culture option is not open to us. We can neither find nor create a rich public life of common institutions, practices, and customs to which each of us is bound by tradition and affection. Hockey Saturday night, church on Sunday, 9-5 for the men during the week, housekeeping and shopping for the women....

It's far from clear we ever lived that way, and not just because Canada has historically been friendly to Jews, artists, and others not entirely in the mainstream, let alone because of our two or three solitudes. Nonetheless, once upon a time the mainstream ran stronger than it does now, it could be identified (more or less, and with regional variations), and, significantly, those who by choice or status swam outside it had to accommodate themselves to it, or else take their chances. That's all behind us now.

A substantive common life makes possible a substantive common good, and the existence of a substantive common good can give direction and order to politics. Perhaps that is what those who resist multiculturalism yearn for most—a widely accepted, emotionally compelling vision of the common good, a vision by which people and governments could resolve justly the competing demands of labour and management, development and conservation, men and women, city and country, young and old, and all the rest.

A multicultural society, on the other hand, lacks a substantive common life. But that doesn't mean it has to have no common life at all. How deep and how compelling should the common life in our multicultural society be? That, I think, is one way of putting the question whether Canada's multiculturalism should be liberal or communitarian.

Over a decade ago, Steven Lukes, in *The Curious Enlightenment of Professor Caritat*, parodied communitarian multiculturalism, the condition in which little common life exists in a society and the state is nothing but a benevolent administrator, trying to maintain peace among society's various cultures.

Lukes has his professor visit a society in which each person is officially a member of one or more cultures according to his or her age, sex, profession, ethnicity, religion, taste in music, and on and on. In Lukes's communitarian society, each person has certain rights and responsibilities within the cultures to which he or she belongs, rights and responsibilities that members of other cultures don't have. (Those born into a culture of hard work must work hard for their living, while those born into a culture of loafing receive subsidies so that they may maintain their dignity while remaining true to their tradition.) A justice system internal to each

culture keeps its own members in line. The justice system for the society as a whole adjudicates disputes between groups—which includes, importantly, disputes in which someone feels an outsider has slighted her group.

The alternative to a communitarian society of sovereign cultures is a liberal society, a society in which people are respected as individuals, not as members of groups, and in which laws and policies have as their end the protection and flourishing of individuals as individuals. Of course, much of what matters to us as individuals stems from the cultures and groups with which we identify, and so if a liberal society is home to many cultures, that liberal society will be multicultural.

Central to any liberal society is that each individual be equipped with the skills, knowledge, and breadth of mind needed to make his or her own way in the world. And so the society will require that children be educated, that they be educated in certain subjects, and that they be educated to certain standards. Central also to a liberal society is fairness and justice—fairness and justice for individuals. Thus the society will have a single system of law and adjudication. The police will not treat people differently on the basis of their group membership, nor will the courts, nor need employers. So that people can live the lives they want and participate in the life of the community as a whole, members of the society will enjoy freedom of expression, freedom of association, and all the other civil liberties communitarians despise because of the frictions they can create.

Since important social institutions in it will embody liberal values and goals, a liberal multicultural society will sustain a common public life. Yet it will be a fairly thin common life, important though it is in supporting the rich particular lives people live.

Now in a liberal society, if one person is entitled to have his wish honoured, then anyone else is similarly entitled. If a Muslim woman may testify in a trial with her face covered, then anyone else who wants to may. If some schoolchildren may carry a small dagger, then any schoolchild may. If no one else may take two spouses, then men in break-away Mormon sects may not either. No one will be exempted from the rules on grounds of culture.

It might well be the majority custom or tradition in Canada today that one not hide one's face when on the witness stand, that kids don't carry knives, that we have but one spouse at a time. But custom or tradition cannot itself justify a practice, at least not in a liberal society. What can is that the practice is harmless to others or promotes individual flourishing. As liberals, we must not require people to follow majority traditions just because they are majority traditions, no more than we can allow people to violate liberal norms in the name of their illiberal cultures.