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The Challenge of Multiculturalism

The western liberal ideal of peoples of different cultures living peaceably beside and among each other is being seriously challenged

Throughout much of the western world, society is now characterized by many different cultures living side by side. According to the 2006 Canadian census, allophones, that is those whose mother tongue is neither English nor French, accounted for one out of every five Canadians. The proportion of those born outside the country was the same. This is the first time that immigrants constituted such a high proportion of the population. This year's census will probably confirm this trend. More significantly, whereas traditionally the vast majority of immigrants have come from Europe, almost sixty per cent of the newcomers now came from Asia, including the Middle East. This means that the cultures brought into Canada by these immigrants were for the most part fundamentally different from those of Canada, since their religious foundations are not Christian. The dominant new religions in the Toronto area seem to be the Muslim and Sikh faiths and variations of that phenomenon are in evidence in all the major urban centres.

The futility of multiculturalism

Our current multicultural policy celebrates differences, with integration as a second priority. This approach presupposes the basic goodness of humanity, the equal value of all cultures, and the belief that the coexistence of totally different cultures presents no threat to national unity.

Yet, it is becoming painfully obvious on the other side of the Atlantic that this type of thinking is turning out to be a wishful dream. Indeed, some European nations are experiencing a growing sense of frustration and futility as they see immigrants not integrating but forming ghetto communities which essentially become little nations within the larger whole. As a result, people living in areas that are slowly being taken over by those

who do not speak their language no longer feel at home in their own city and move out. Often, as is evident especially in France, these urban areas with their self-imposed segregation suffer from high unemployment and are breeding grounds for extremists both politically and religiously. Islamic radicals are quick to make the most of such opportunities. Tensions mount in society and distrust and suspicion are sown. Things have thankfully not developed that far in Canada, but with every immigrant that refuses to integrate into society, a potential seed of discord is being sown. The indicators for the future are not encouraging when one considers that Muslims have already taken people and even a national magazine, *Maclean's*, to human rights tribunals on charges of subjecting Canadian Muslims to hatred and contempt. Tensions mount and more clashes can be expected between a culture with a Christian heritage and an Islamic population whose numbers and influence are rapidly expanding in the West.

Multiculturalism has clearly failed in Europe. This fact is so obvious that in the last year or so the German, British, and French heads of state have all bluntly admitted this reality. The western liberal ideal of peoples of different cultures living peaceably beside and among each other is being seriously challenged.

The tensions between the cultures, be they latent or open, show the ultimate futility of humanism trying to undo the curse which God had once placed on mankind at the time of the Tower of Babel. God had then confused their language so they could not understand each other in order to disperse people all over the globe (Gen 11:1-9). Different languages and cultures developed. No liberal secular immigration policy and no well-intentioned human desires can undo the divisions that God has put in place as a result of sin and the pride of man. Humanistic multicultural

thinking is simply no sure or adequate foundation for overcoming this division and bringing different races, languages, and cultures together in lasting harmony and peace.

The only antidote to the cursed dispersion of Babel is the blessing of the Spirit of Pentecost. When God poured out his Spirit upon his church, he started to bring nations together. The gospel united them. Even though they all spoke different languages, they could all understand the gospel which was proclaimed to them (Acts 2:7-11). The curse of the Tower of Babel was being overcome by the gospel that bound them to the head of the new mankind, Jesus Christ, the only Saviour of the world (Acts 4:12). Only the gospel can truly serve to bring cultures together in a lasting unity. Therein lies the challenge of multiculturalism for Christians today.

The opportunities

Multiculturalism offers us many opportunities to show something of Christian love and compassion to those who are strangers to the western world and its Christian heritage. Indeed, Scripture teaches us that this is our obligation. In Old Testament Israel a significant part of the population consisted of strangers and aliens. Although these people were culturally and ethnically different from Israel, God's people were told to take care of them in various ways (Deut 5:14; 14:28-29). God's law, however, differentiated between the strangers who wished to integrate into society and the foreigners who had no desire to do so. The former received preferential treatment. The latter did not (e.g., Deut 14:21). The only way to be fully accepted into the nation on an equal footing with the native born Israelite was to accept the God of Israel as the true God. Then the stranger or immigrant could attend the Passover (Exod 12:48-49; Num 9:14). In other words, their full assimilation into the nation depended on their accepting Israel's God.

We cannot undo the divisions that God has put in place as a result of sin and the pride of man

Now on one level this is an obvious requirement for Israel. After all, that nation was the chosen people of God, the church. Naturally you would have to worship the same God to be part of this people. No nation today can claim to be God's special people. There is, however, a basic principle that is applicable to today. The Canadian government as servant of God (Rom 13:4) and as inheritor of a rich Christian heritage has the duty to safeguard that heritage. This means that while it should protect the freedom of religion for those entering our country, it should also set limits to that freedom. Where the demands of a foreign religion transgress the norms of Canada as influenced by Christianity, they should be forbidden. That includes the rejection of such institutions as Sharia law and polygamy, both of which are to varying degrees accepted and tolerated in Europe. Such toleration can only serve to weaken the unity of a nation. Admission to Canada should entail a promise to comply with Western law and tradition wherever Islamic law clashes with it.

Although in this age of postmodernism religious uniformity is impossible to achieve in a western nation, history does teach us to be very careful in trying to bring together in an artificial unity what

does not belong together. A country and a people are strongest if they share a religious heritage. After Britain relinquished control of India in 1947, this country split largely along religious lines into mainly Hindu India, and predominantly Muslim Pakistan and Bangladesh. More recently, Yugoslavia has fallen apart into seven different countries; religion was an important factor in defining these nations, the latest being Muslim Kosovo getting its disputed independence from Serbia.

Today's multicultural reality offers us the opportunity to show Christian compassion and love to those who are strangers and aliens in our country. The highest degree of love that we can show is to share the gospel with them. This is the real challenge of multiculturalism. The mission field has moved into our backyard, or should I say front yard? It is most encouraging to see Canadian Reformed and United Reformed initiatives in this area within our nation. After all, the gospel is the only way to bridge cultural and ethnic divides. Only the Spirit of Christ can bind together into a true unity, the unity of the faith.

The new mankind

The church is the new mankind which God is raising up. Therein lies the true and lasting hope for the future. Multiculturalism on a humanistic basis can eventually destroy a country if enough diverse foreign populations with strong and different religious views shape the political landscape. The Europeans are beginning to realize this. We need to warn our own politicians about this threat as well.

Only the gospel can truly serve to bring cultures together in a lasting unity

But, when all has been said and done, ultimately it is only the gospel that can truly unite a people. Only the Spirit binds together and overcomes the Tower of Babel confusion! As Psalm 87 so eloquently notes, in God's one holy nation they will come from many different backgrounds, such as Egypt, Babylon, and Tyre. But they will all be recorded as born in Zion. This is the new humanity which God is raising up in the present world. It is the singular privilege of the church and its members to work for that unity as the Lord gives opportunity! May that great work of our God in raising up a new mankind encourage us to profile ourselves as belonging to this new mankind and to be active participants as the Lord gathers the innumerable multitude together from all the tribes and nations of the earth (Rev 5:9; 7:9).

