A Reflection on Canadian Identity Today:

BEYOND MULTICULTURALISM

Grounding Ourselves in a Native Canadian Dimension

By Wayne Holst

What does it mean to be a Canadian Today?

If you are a Canadian, how would you define yourself as a citizen?

Over time, that definition keeps changing and evolving. Through our history – as more people join us and we mature as a nation – our national spirituality is also changing.

100 years ago, when Canadians fought in World War One, we did so as British subjects. When we entered World War Two we did so as Canadians but many Quebecois were not pleased that they were fighting in a war dominated by the English.

Fifty years ago we started to describe ourselves as a bilingual and bicultural nation. When that seemed inadequate to many of our people, the idea was expanded to multiculturalism.

In some ways that still continues to describe us but a most important ingredient has been missing. Now, one significant reality has been added.

We are beginning to understand ourselves from a Native Canadian dimension. Using John Ralson Saul’s term in his book “A Fair Country” we are becoming aware of ourselves as “A Metis Nation.”

We have been heavily influenced and shaped by Aboriginal ideas such as egalitarianism, proper balance between individual and group, and a penchant for negotiation rather than violence. All of these are values that Canada has absorbed. We see the results in our healthcare system and our evolving legal system as traditional British and French law evolves to adapt to new realities in a new world.

How important it is to recognize that we are influenced by the fact that Native Canadians were here first. As we started arriving from Europe, the United States and other parts of the Americas, we have been joined by new Canadians from around the world. Gradually we are coming to see that there were significant cultures already present, to which we had to accommodate, even though our relations with the First Nations has always been an uneasy one.

Richard Wagamese, a fine Ojibway writer and one of Canada’s best today, now publishes “Medicine Walk” a profoundly spiritual story that integrates both Judeo-Christian and Traditional spiritualities.

We are not just different from Americans, but different in ways that matter. We are not a melting pot of cultures, but respectful of the different cultures that continue to influence us as Canadians.

Wagamese believes that we are far more Aboriginal than European and American and our failure to recognize and celebrate this prevents us from becoming the strong, confident and progressive country that is our birthright.

Whether we can all agree that the First Nations are indeed the founding pillar of our civilization, and that Native spirituality is indeed something we can integrate to our nation’s cultural values – will be key issues with which we will be grappling this fall as people of our congregation study both Ralston Saul and Wagamese.

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