Canadian Culture in Cross-Cultural Perspective

By Philip Carl Salzman

The view that "There is no core identity, no mainstream in Canada," put forward by the Prime Minister,[1] appears to be factually incorrect. In reality, notwithstanding Canada's official multiculturalism policy[2], Canadian culture is firmly based in Western civilization.[3]

The main Canadian political structures, in form and content, are derived from Western civilization: Language is a foundational substructure of culture, and Canada's two official languages are English and French.[4] Canada's democratic governmental structures, Parliament and the Provinces, draw upon British and French traditions.[5] Canadian law is based on English Common Law and French Civil Law.[6]

Basic principles of Canadian culture can be traced to the Western Enlightenment. These would include separation of church and state, equality before the law, respect for science and education, and, according to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms,[7] freedom of the individual in speech and expression, religion, marriage, association, voting, and in movement.

During the past half century, expanding concern with human rights and equality have introduced new principles and laws ensuring gender equality[8] and freedom of sexual choice.[9]

These features of Canadian culture are not universal in all countries and all cultures. There is no more basic fact of human life than that societies and cultures differ from one another in foundational principles, values and goals, organizational characteristics, and in constraints and opportunities.[10]

To highlight the distinctiveness of Canadian culture and Western civilization, I shall offer brief accounts of some of the main characteristics of South Asian and Middle Eastern civilizations. The point of this exercise is to underline the very different visions, or worldviews of these contrasting civilizations. Summing up a culture or civilization briefly is of course fraught with dangers of essentialism, oversimplification, and distortion. But, in case it may provide some reassurance, I can report that I know these places because I have lived in both South Asia and the Middle East, and I have carried out anthropological field research in both places, and published academic books and articles on my research.

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[1] https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/13/magazine/trudeaus-canada-again.html?_r=1

[2] http://www.pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/canadian-multiculturalism-act-1988

[3] http://www.macdonaldlaurier.ca/yes-canada-does-have-a-culture-philip-carl-salzman-for-inside-policy/

[4] http://www.officiallanguages.gc.ca/en/language_rights/index

[5] http://www.ourcommons.ca/marleaumontpetit/DocumentViewer.aspx?Print=2&Sec=Ch01&Seq=2

[6] http://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csj-sjc/just/03.html

[7] http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/Const/page-15.html

[8] https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/rights-women.html

[9] https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/services/rights-lgbti-persons.html

[10] Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1935

Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, NY, 1973

https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3049104/

The core of traditional Indian civilization is a hierarchy of castes with the purest at the top and the most polluted at the bottom.[11] Those most pure at the top, such as Brahmin priests, are closest to the gods, while those most polluted at the bottom, such as sweepers of dirt and faeces, butchers, and leather tanners, are closest to lower animals and to death.[12] Those at the top are vegetarian and eat mild food only, such as milk and rice, and those at the bottom eat strong foods, onions and hot peppers, drink spirits, and, worse, eat meat. Castes are large kin groups that are traditionally associated with particular professions, each caste serving the larger community, and receiving services from the other castes.

The four *varna* categories of castes–the Brahmin priests and scholars, Kshatriyas rulers and soldiers, Vaishyas farmers and merchants, and Sudras labourers and service providers–are regarded as clean castes, while those that fall below are regarded as "untouchables" because of their infectious pollution. The caste hierarchy engages the power of the universe in the following fashion: People are born into their caste through reincarnation, rebirth. Those who in a previous life had fulfilled well their caste *dharma*, duty, enjoy the *karma*, destiny, of being born in a higher caste. Those who had failed to fulfill their caste *dharma*, suffer the *karma*, destiny, of being born in a lower clean caste, or as an untouchable, or even as a lower animal.

Castes do not take food or wives from lower castes, and generally marry internally, endogamously. South Asians lived in extended families of three or more generations, the lives and work of the members of each being directed by the senior members. Matter dealing with the caste were dealt with by the caste council of senior males. Juniors were subservient to seniors, and women subservient to men. Marriages are arranged by families. Wives were duty bound to obey their husbands, and widows, who had failed to keep their husbands alive, were despised.

South Asia, prior to the arrival of the British, was organized into a multitude of regional political units ruled by hereditary Emperors, Kings, Maharajahs, and the like. While castes were largely self-governing, towns and regions were ordered by the caste hierarchy and governed by their rulers. Democracy was not part of the South Asian tradition.

Middle Eastern civilization was founded on the Bedouin tribal culture of Arabia, and entered world history in the seventh century c.e. with the establishment of Islam and the rapid expansion of the Arab Empire that conquered half the world, from Iberia to India. Among the Bedouin and other tribal peoples, descent through the male line, patrilineal descent, defines each tribal segment, from small families through lineages small and large, tribal sections, and tribes. Each segment is defined by and usually named after its apical ancestor, a few generations back for small segments, many generations back for large segments and tribes.[13]

Living in the desert, migrating from place to place with their camels, Bedouin were, and, for practical reasons, had to be autonomous, operating according to the will of each scattered individual, family, and small lineage of kinsmen. In other words, decisions about life were local, decentralized, not made by any authority other than the participants. All were descendants from the same ancestor, and so were deemed to be jurally equal. The primary imperative was loyalty to one's kin group at every level of encompassment, from small families to tribes. The other desiderata was honour, which took two forms: '*Ird*, which is personal honour, and reflects the behaviour of the women in a man's family; *Sharaf*, is honour reflecting political standing.[14] If the women in a man's family act modestly, his personal honour remains intact. If a man is loyal to his kin group, and supports it against all challenges, his political honour is high within the group. But in conflicts, it is the winners who gain political honour in the wider community; the losers lose honour.[15] It was common practice among the Bedouin to raid for cattle, and conflict over pasture and territory often led to tribal wars, with some

[11] Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*. University of Chicago Press, 1981

[12] Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar, eds., *Caste in Modern India*. Orient Black Swan, 2013/ Permanent Black (Amazon Digital Services), 2014

[13] Philip Carl Salzman, *Culture and Conflict in the Middle East*. Humanity Books, 2008
https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/11117/middle-east-tribal-culture

[14] Frank Henderson Stewart, *Honor*. University of Chicago, 1994

[15] Gideon Kressel, *Ascendancy through Aggression: The Anatomy of a Blood Feud among Urbanized Bedouins.* Harrassowitz, 1996.

tribes triumphing over others, and pushing them out of their territory.[16]

The concept of *Sharaf*, political honour, supports individual autonomy, for a man taking orders from someone loses honour. In the same way, the idea of political honour supports equality, for, if everyone is equal, no one should take orders from anyone else, and decision should be either individual or collective. Decision-making in the desert was and is democratic. The concept of "consent," *muafaqa*, is basic in collective, democratic decision-making, and has its place in the broadest "community of Muslim," the *umma*. Ironically, the freedom and equality so pronounced in Bedouin culture militates against political authority structures, such as rulers and their governments. If everyone is equal, and taking orders reduces one's honour, so rulers and governments have no basis to claim legitimate authority, and the populace is loath to grant such recognition.[17] This means the establishment and maintenance of a state political hierarchy requires coercion: police, secret police, militias, armies. Thus, in this most democratic of all cultures, it is impossible to have a democratic state. In fact, no Arab state is democratic; all are kingdoms or despotisms. Iran is a theocracy; Turkey moving in the same direction.[18]

In Middle Eastern culture, supported by religious law, men are responsible for women, and women have an obligation to obey their fathers and husbands. Marriages are arranged, with fathers making the final decision. Women's modesty supports men's personal honour, but immodest behaviour throws that honour in jeopardy. Any contact between a woman, especially a nubile woman, and a man not a close relative, if it should become known publicly, throws shame on her family, raises doubts about her mother and sisters, and undermines the status of her male relatives. Cleansing family honour is thought to require elimination of the offender, sometimes by exile, sometimes by honour killing.[19]

South Asian civilization, with its focus on purity and pollution, caste hierarchy, and reincarnation, and Middle Eastern civilization, concerned with autonomy, freedom, and honour, each have their own distinct vision and their own integrity. But it is not an invidious comparison to say that they are quite different from one another. Each has its own virtue and its own beauty, the South Asian intricate, the Middle Eastern austere. Similarly, it is not an invidious comparison to say that both South Asian civilization and Middle Eastern civilization are each quite different from Western civilization, and from the particular Canadian version of Western civilization.

How could we possibly argue, as the Prime Minister has, that Canada has no mainstream, no culture, when our Canadian way of life is so obviously different, in a multitude of ways, from South Asian and Middle Eastern civilizations? And while there is great diversity in Canada–regional, urban-rural, French-English, and ethnic–it is encompassed within the framework of Canadian culture. Even our beloved "multiculturalism" is part of Canadian culture and Western civilization; "multiculturalism" is not one of the ideas embedded in South Asian civilization, nor is it a believable idea in Middle Eastern civilization. Upon serious consideration, it is impossible to deny that Canada has a distinct culture as part of the distinct Western civilization.[20]

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[16] Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*. Clarendon Press, 1949

[17] Charles Lindholm, *The Islamic Middle East: Tradition and Change.* Wiley-Blackwell, 2002

[18] https://www.yabiladi.com/img/content/EIU-Democracy-Index-2015.pdf

[19] Joseph Ginat, *Blood Revenge: Family Honor, Mediation, and Outcasting* 2nd Ed. Sussex Academic Press, 1997

[20] Uni, Wikan, *In Honor of Fadime*. University of Chicago Press, 2008

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Philip Carl Salzman B.A. (Antioch), M.A., Ph.D. (Chicago) is Professor of Anthropology at McGill University, appointed in 1968. He founded the Commission on Nomadic Peoples of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, and its international journal, *Nomadic Peoples*, for which he received the IUAES Gold Award. In recent years he has also served as Senior Fellow at the University of St. Andrews, Open Society International Scholar at the American University of Central Asia, Erasmus Mundus International Fellow at the University of Catania, and Visiting Professor at the University of Sydney. Extensive ethnographic field research in Baluchistan (Iran), Gujarat and Rajasthan (India), and Sardinia (Italy) provided the foundation many articles in academic journals, and for book publications such as *The Anthropology of Real Life: Events in Human Experience* (1999), *Black Tents of Baluchistan* (2000), winner of the Premio Pitr–Salomone Marino, *Understanding Culture: An Introduction of Anthropological Theory* (2001), *Pastoralists: Equality, Hierarchy, and the State* (2004), *Culture and Conflict in the Middle East* (2008), *Postcolonial Theory and the Arab-Israel Conflict* (2008), and *Thinking Anthropologically 3rd Ed*, (2010). His latest book publication is *Classic Comparative Anthropology: Studies from the Tradition* (2012). In public affairs, he was a member of Middle East Strategy at Harvard (2008-2010), a member of the Board of Directors of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (2004-2012), and is currently a Senior Fellow at the Frontier Centre for Public Policy, a member of the Academic Council of the Canadian Institute for Jewish Studies, a Fellow of the Middle East Forum (2015-), and a member of the Board of Directors of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East (2016-). His articles have been published by the Frontier Centre, the Middle East Forum, the Gatestone Institute, the Canadian Institute for Jewish Research, the Macdonald Laurier Institute, and Areo Magazine.