

**Paul Bramadat and David Seljak (eds), *Religion and Ethnicity in Canada*,  
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*Religion and Ethnicity in Canada* edited by Paul Bramadat and David Seljak is a collection of eleven papers by various scholars who, while preparing for the book, had met on two separate occasions under the auspices of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society (CSRS) at the University of Victoria in British Columbia, Canada. These meetings allowed the authors 'to develop a common perspective about the nature of the book' (p. vii). The text collectively examines the complex relationship between religion and ethnicity in six minority communities in Canada: Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Chinese, Jews, and Muslims. It also explores the absence of religious considerations in public policy, education and health care, and argues for the re-inclusion of religion in these discourses.

Bramadat notes in Chapter 1 that while Christian denominations are experiencing a decline in membership, these minority religions are undergoing a dramatic upsurge. This leads to a radical redrawing of the religious landscape, a portrait that begs to be properly understood. Part One aims to provide this understanding, outlining the six minority communities and the nature of their presence in Canada. The chapters are organised, for the most part, around themes such as the history of immigration, religious worldview, gender issues, discrimination, and generational relationships.

Bramadat explicitly states the central point of the book in Chapter 1: that 'religious ideas, texts, rituals, symbols, and institutions are in the end redeployed by new Canadians in a uniquely Canadian way. Another way to put it is to say that religion is never relocated (like baggage), but rather is always re-created' (p. 13). This 'baggage' analogy is referred to in practically every subsequent chapter and makes apparent the main thrust of the book: to understand how immigrants are adapting, rationalising, and negotiating their identity in a new climate.

Collectively, Part One argues that religion is hugely important for individuals, an integral part of our identity, informing our way of life. Based on this conclusion, Part Two laments the exclusion of religion from public policy, education and health care. Chapter Eight, for example, notes that religion is often ‘subsumed under the label of race’ and ‘despite the increased religious diversity in Canada, public discourse surrounding immigration, citizenship, and multiculturalism has marginalized religion and religious communities’ (pp. 163-164).

The text argues that to cultivate true multiculturalism, not just a simplistic tolerance of other religions, the ‘religiously illiterate populace’ must be educated about the beliefs, history, and practices of other religious groups. Since ‘67 percent of Canadians said their religious faith was “very important” to their day-to-day lives’, an understanding of other religions is necessary to provide a sustainable and realistic foundation to Canada’s presentation of itself as a multicultural nation (p. 165).

David Seljak argues that the removal of religion from public education is a case of ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’. As he states: ‘the de-Christianization of public schools often meant the removal of all religion from the curriculum’ (p. 179). Similarly, Peter Stephenson notes that an understanding of minority religious beliefs is largely absent from health care and hospital procedures. The Sikh restriction against cutting hair, for example, has consequences for surgery and other medical examinations. And, the Islamic injunction that burial should occur on the same day as a person’s death creates complications for organ donations and autopsies. In other words, to presume that religious beliefs do not influence an individual’s life could lead to unnecessary controversy and emotional trauma.

The tone of Part One is descriptive while Part Two is argumentative. Part One, however, does not do enough describing. Context is required for many of the

themes and examples that are introduced to aid introductory readers. The chapter on Sikhs in Canada, for instance, provides an excellent introduction to Sikhism before delving into major issues. When these major issues are introduced, however, knowledge of current events in the Sikh community is assumed.

For example, the author states: 'Every Sikh in Canada laments the disgrace into which the community has fallen subsequent to the fighting over the presence of tables and chairs in a Surrey gurudwara' (p. 59). Previous knowledge of several issues is assumed: do Sikhs eat while seated on the floor or tables? Who argues for/against sitting on the floor? Why is this controversial? Where, for a non-Canadian reader, is Surrey? In other words, an important event that caused 'disgrace' to the Sikh community is presented without context.

Although the chapter on Sikhism provides an introduction to the religion, the chapter on Judaism does not. An extensive knowledge of Judaism is assumed from the beginning of the chapter where terms like 'Reform Judaism', 'the Conservative movement', and 'ultra-Orthodox' are introduced without explanation (p. 111). The chapter dealing with Muslims provides a short history of Islam but neglects discussion of the Five Pillars and *shari'ah*, *hadith*, and *fiqh* are not adequately explained.

Similarly, several issues are simply flagged and not developed in depth such as the debate about the hijab, the Wahhabi influence in the West, and the kirpan-in-schools. Of course, it could be argued that the objective of the text is to understand religion and ethnicity in Canada, not to provide an introduction to world religions. This is true but, as a teaching tool, the text requires background information and explanation of key terms (for example, Wahhabism).

Criticisms aside, *Religion and Ethnicity in Canada* is a much needed contribution to the study of religion in Canada. Discussions about 'institutional completeness',

a term referring to how groups create services aimed at providing for other members of the group (for example, bookstores, religious and social organizations and schools), the unique religious role of Chinatowns, and identity formation among ethnic groups (to name a few) are both illuminating and practical. It is an essential text that will help doctors, policy makers, professors and students understand the challenges arising out of the changing religious landscape in Canada as well as other countries experiencing similar developments.

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