

Dr. Paul Bramadat
Director, Centre for Studies in Religion and Society
University of Victoria
<http://csrs.uvic.ca/>

Recently (April 2010), the former premier of British Columbia and current member of Parliament Ujjal Dosanjh suggested that Sikh militancy is on the rise in Canada and that this is the fault of multiculturalism. I am not an expert on Sikhism, but I am interested in the popularity of the view, expressed by Dosanjh and others, that a connection exists between religious extremism on the one hand and progressive social policies such as multiculturalism on the other.

The general drift of this argument is that if a society actively promotes the value of diversity, as Canada and Canadians generally do, then all cultural expressions must be permitted – including the illiberal ones associated with terrorism, misogyny and authoritarianism.

One part of this argument is rooted in anxieties over relativism and the “slippery slope.” In my view, while it is worthwhile to remain cautious about the eventual consequences of a particular social change (e.g., euthanasia legislation, changes in the definition of marriage, greenhouse gas controls), it does not follow that a liberal approach to some claims will necessitate the same approach to all claims.

It is true that in Canada we enjoy a generally tolerant public discourse around cultural and religious practices and claims. This tolerance is not absolute, however, as we have seen in public discourse and legislation related to “honour killings” and female genital mutilation, Quebec society’s responses to the small number of “niqabi” Muslim women in the province, the post-9/11 federal policies around security, and the federal decision to bar George Galloway from speaking in Canada. Whether these examples are reasonable or laudable is a separate question: the point is that the state frequently draws lines, and the lines do sometimes exclude people and practices.

Another way to examine the evidence for the argument about the connection between multiculturalism and militancy is to consider other societies where religious extremism has become problematic – the UK, the United States, France, Germany, Palestine/Israel, Pakistan, India, the Netherlands, Algeria, Afghanistan, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia to name just a few. Given the fact that these societies vary so wildly in terms of their approaches to religious pluralism, Canadian-style multiculturalism does not appear to be a very reliable predictor for religious radicalization.

A major problem is the fact that scholars and policy makers interested in understanding and diminishing religious radicalization cannot point to a single determinative factor to explain why some religious communities, or, more often, some individuals and some very small factions within particular communities, adopt militant views. Poverty and discrimination may play roles in this transformation, but we also know of many situations

in which the perpetrators and supporters could make very few complaints (of personal poverty, personal discrimination, etc.).

In any event, those concerned about whether Canada's imperfect but relatively flourishing (relative to other states) multicultural ethos is likely to enable religious extremism might consider a much broader range of causes in the future. While religious radicalization, especially among racialized minority youth, exists within most of Canada's religious communities, more critical attention to the particular features of each irruption is needed before we can speak with much confidence about why it arises, not to mention how we might reduce it when it does.