

Another recent call in the media for newer immigrants to integrate by giving up their values, traditions and cultures.

What does this mean? Is the call for us to jettison our previous lives before we touch the shores of Canada and do we then emerge as ...eh?

I thought as Canadians we had learnt from our past of the cruel, demeaning treatment of our First Nations people and that negating people's multiple identities does not work. Please understand that I mean no disrespect to the first Canadians when I see some similarity between the demands made of them and now of newer immigrants.

When our organization was struggling against the possible imposition of religious family laws in private arbitration, I did a lot of public speaking. There was genuine interest but also lots of racism, and at one meeting a woman shouted at me that we did not have Canadian values. When I asked her to define these, she spoke of European [British] cultures and not a word about First Nations. I challenged her by asking whether she included any aboriginal values and her response was "they did not add to Canadian values as we know them." What a great pity!

I have a great deal of respect for aboriginal peoples and regret that I have limited knowledge and experience of them. However, I have sensed that many new Canadians from Asia and Africa share some similar values with the First Nations.

Recently the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada initiated courses for doctor trainees on indigenous cultures, because they found some marked differences between aboriginal and "mainstream" cultures.

Some examples are: for natives the community is of foremost value; goals are met with patience; eye contact is thought to be overly assertive; a handshake is soft, signaling no threat and faith in harmony with nature is important. Mainstream – read European - values are that the individual is foremost; goals are met with aggressive effort; eye contact is part of communication; a handshake must be firm and assertive and faith is in the scientific control of nature.

Some of the aboriginal traditions are shared by many of the newcomers to Canada. One example is the higher value placed on the community rather than the individual. And I have heard too often that Asians are "shifty eyed" or not "honest" because they too won't look into others' eyes or because their handshake is "limp."

Certainly there are some customs and traditions which do clash and new immigrants must discard these, but there are other traditions which are being absorbed into Canadian culture and have made it richer.

One of the traditions that I think should be jettisoned is patriarchy and all this entails. Yes, elements of patriarchy still exist in Canada, but for me what is worrisome is the strength of patriarchy and its resultant practices within most of the cultures of Asia and Africa. These are brought over by many immigrants.

The major challenge is how the role of women is defined within the community and the family. If the male is seen as the human norm with the woman as an adjunct, and if males are given the authority to provide and to safeguard the whole family, it naturally follows that women are treated as dependent and in need of male authority.

Undoubtedly, the defined roles of men and women worked in societies which were traditional, and it must be comforting to have others look after us women. But surely the abdication and exchange of independence; choices and equality for “protection and safeguarding” is highly imbalanced and detrimental for women and their families.

This is further exacerbated by the manipulation of religious teachings to cement patriarchy. There are too many fathers and brothers who take it upon themselves to control their women under the guise of culture and religion. We have had recent examples of this tradition which has led to abuse and murder.

It depresses me profoundly that some women agree with patriarchy and the unequal relationships and cannot see that human rights, especially equality, are not only essential and beneficial for women but for society and families as well.

I believe that most men would be relieved to give up the heavy burden of guardianship of all females and share their responsibilities. But I guess for some men this power and control is heady stuff, and few give up power willingly.

The fusion of patriarchy, religion or politics is powerful and must be strongly discouraged for any of us, whether we be newer immigrants or longstanding Canadians. We have the Charter as our statement of values and these should be adhered to by all of us, regardless of personal or religious preferences.

The conversation amongst Canadians must continue about the dynamic evolving nature of religions, cultures and traditions and that it behooves each individual and group to assess practices, no matter how precious, which should be discarded if they are harmful to others.