

POPPIES TRUMP TURBANS

I have been trying to figure out why "Remembrance Day" each year seems sadder than the one previous. I think it's because we've forgotten what to remember.

And it never fails to strike me that the 115,000 young Canadians who gave their lives to protect a specific way of life against top-down rule must now be rolling in their graves.

All the more galling, then, were the editorials and columns by smug journalists actually urging readers not to buy a poppy when they learned that a turban-wearing citizen had been refused entry to the inner sanctum of a Canadian Legion Hall, which allows no headgear of any kind. Some argued the Canadian Legion as a whole, which has always sold poppies for Remembrance Day, should "pay the price" for the refusal of some halls to permit the wearing of headgear.

But asking us to choose between poppies, turbans, yarmulkes, and stetsons, falsifies a continuing debate.

At the heart of this mess are three misunderstood principles surrounding tolerance, private property, and religious belief, all brought under attack by rights-seeking, charter-bearing Sikhs over this incident.

Perhaps one day we will awaken to discover that there is an inherent conflict between the idea of "tolerance," and the idea of "rights," because someone who is claiming a right is doing so regardless of whether or not we tolerate the claim. A Sikh asserts a right to wear a turban in a Legion Hall; Legion members assert their right to call their own shots and refuse headgear. There has got to be a loser whose view will not be tolerated.

Most cultures have a time-honoured, tit-for-tat solution to such mutual intolerances: When I am in your house, I do it your way, when you are in my house, you do it my way. Or we don't visit each others' houses. Period. Not bad.

Which brings us to the common-law rules and sanctity of private property, that precious heritage of free societies based on ancient British traditions. Our Charter of Rights and Freedoms does not support the right to private property. But it should, else nothing is safe from rights-seekers. Not the homes, offices, or private lives of Christians, Sikhs, or pagans. Nothing. Legions should be able to require bathing suits, if they wish. Sikhs may do the same on their own property. Who cares?

I asked a priest of the Shromani Sikh Society in Toronto what would happen if I showed up at his temple with the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, demanding my right to enter wearing shoes, and bare-headed. Horrified, he said "It is absolutely forbidden! All must take off their shoes and cover their heads as a sign of respect."

So now to religion. Some (not all) Sikhs say the turban is a required item of religious apparel, even though millions of devout Sikhs do not wear a turban, and lots of

Sikhs remove the turban when it is convenient to do so. For example, many years ago, my friend and Indian Champion, Mr. Singh, always removed his turban to run against me in the high hurdles. Be that as it may, a turban is a strong religious symbol for many. Fine.

So now we have a clash of religious values, because in all Christian societies (80 to 90 per cent of Canadians say they are Christian), the requirement for a male to remove all headwear in church, in another's place of worship, in a house, at funerals, when greeting women, and in all solemn places, is firmly rooted in Christian religious practice.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Chapter Eleven, St. Paul writes "For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, forasmuch as he is the image and glory of God." Hat-doffing by males in our society originated as a deep show of respect for God and others and continues as a general sign of respect.

Another forgotten truth is that in every culture in the world, veneration of the dead is the most serious religious matter. Beer and peanuts in a Legion Hall may not be wine and wafer. Nevertheless, a gathering of veterans there, if not a mass or communion, is certainly a kind of community specifically organized around the consecration of the dead who gave their lives in war. The poppy is their blood.

All of which is to say that no one should accept the lazy charge of discrimination, racism, or bigotry that liberals (whose only principle, increasingly, is that "anything goes") use to weaken such customs. For these are genuine conflicts rooted in contrary traditions. We all know that the Sikh religion is admirable in many ways (not drinking or smoking, honouring God, etc), and that Sikhs have been ferocious freedom fighters in our wars. But they fought to defend rights that - like the rest of us - they are now undermining with other rights. So they should not be surprised if one day the police crash through their front door with no warrant to search their homes or temples.

The forgotten truth is that Christian nations have their own customs and traditions and, unlike so many other nations, we have worked out effective ways consistent with a free society for dealing with conflicts. It will simply not do to have every minority group in Canada grab the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and march into court whenever they cannot force their way on others.

And remember especially. It is not Canada that has the slavery of bonded labour, religious wars, widow-burning, caste systems, infanticide of female children, and disgusting poverty. It is India, the country most Sikhs came here from. Many of them came to Canada to get away from those very evils. We may have learned things from India in the past. Maybe it is India's turn to learn from us.