Identity, Personhood, and Religion in Caribbean Context

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RESUMÉ: Cet essai discute la notion d'identité Caraïbe comme étant conceptuelment incohérente avec la notion de Individualisme. Cette discussion présente que la notion d'identité Caraïbe est une invention idéologique existante dans le discours et méta-discours de la litérature contemporaine des Caraïbes; présente une distinction entre deux types d'identités: objective et subjective-existentielle. Pour la notion de individualisme la discussion trace sa signification dans le monde occidental et démontre que cette notion réflecte la vision Hindoue et Islamique d'individualisme. La discussion dispute que cette signification d'individualisme est principalement en corrélation avec un type d'identité et que l'identité Caraïbe inventée est en correlation avec l'autre type d'identité; l'identité démontrer l'experience culturelle historique d'un groupe. L'incohérence est principalement liée à l'idée de confondre l'identité objective avec l'identité subjective-existentelle. Naturelment, l'identité existentielle peut aussi se développer à travers les pratiques sociales. L'identité objective dans un contexte religieux, implique aussi l'utilization de symboles qui démontre une transcendance, tandis que l'identité Caraïbe manque aux symboles intégrants qui existent sous forme de mythes narratifs, fait que l'identité Caraïbe est conceptuelment incohérente avec un sens solide de l'individualisme.

SUMMARY: This paper contends that the notion of Caribbean identity is conceptually incoherent with the notion of personhood for culturally diverse groups of people in the Caribbean. It sees the former notion as an ideological invention voiced in the discourse and meta-discourse of contemporary Caribbean literature. It draws a distinction between two types of identity: fact and sense. For the latter notion, it traces out a meaning in western thought and shows that it is reflected by the vision of person in Hinduism and in Islam as well. It then argues that personhood correlates primarily with one type identity while the invented Caribbean identity that is intended to give ascendancy to the historical cultural experience of one group, correlates with the other type. Incoherence is due largely to mistaking fact of identity as sense of identity, understandably because a sense type identity might grow out of social practices as well. This latter type, in religious contexts, involves also the use of symbols pointing to transcendence, whereas the invented Caribbean identity lacks symbols tied to a metaphysics of self. In short, lacking reference to integrative symbols that have myth as their narrative forms, Caribbean identity is conceptually incoherent with a robust meaning of personhood.

One of the preoccupations of contemporary Caribbean literature is to define a postcolonial vision of the future with a social philosophy for people of the Caribbean region. Discourse for that purpose frequently employs the term *identity*, and more specifically the idiom *Caribbean identity* In the zeal to redefine and eulogize a vision sometimes ordinary terms can have their meanings stretched to the point of semantic and conceptual confusion. This

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seems to be the case with the term identity in discourse and meta-discourse[1] promoting the idea of a Caribbean culture, or consciousness, or person. Even the literature[2] on socio-economic and political aspects of the region reflects confusion about *Caribbean identity*.

To have to propose through literature an identity, however, creates suspicion about it as an ideological invention by those frustrated in their search for lost fragments of cultural roots deemed necessary for the formation of a person. An imagined and internalized identity would offer relief from psychic despair that such frustration occasions, but at the same time it posits a difference or otherness. That difference, in an energized socio-political milieu, can become translated by popular feelings into an incentive for hegemonic power instead of an incentive for critical self-understanding without which there is no sound economic and cultural development, no peace and security for the ethnically diverse 30 million people[3] of the Caribbean region. Though there are other possible reasons for the proposal of such an identity, the one stated here is significant for the task at hand in so far as it implicitly recognizes that the connection between one's cultural identity and personhood is complex. The task is to enquire about conceptual coherence, the extent to which Caribbean identity and personhood conceptually cohere and more specifically whether the concept *Caribbean identity* is an internally consistent one.

My basic contention is that the notion of Caribbean identity does not conceptually

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[1] For such discourses, see R. Nettleford, *Inward Stretch Outward Reach: A Voice from the Caribbean,* London 1993, pp. 10, 57, 61, 65, 119, 123, 125, 126, *passim.* His book is a collection of essays over the last dozen years presented on different occasions. Other relevant materials include Ralph Premdas, "Ethnic Identity In The Caribbean: Decentering a Myth", *Lectures and Papers in Ethnicity Series,* n. 17, 1995; I. M. Zavala, "A Caribbean Social Imagery; Redoubled Notes on Critical-Fiction against the gaze of Ulysses", *Latin American Identity and Constructions of Difference,* University of Minnesota Press, 1994; E. M. Thomas-Hope, "Caribbean Identity: A Matter of Perception," and C. G. Clarke, "Caribbean Consciousness," in *Perspectives On Caribbean Regional Identity,* University of Liverpool, 1984; K. Worcester, "A Victorian with the rebel seed: C. L. R. James and the politics of intellectual engagement", *Intellectuals in the Twentieth-century Caribbean, vol.*1, London, 1992, p. 119; R. Toumson, "The Question of Identity in Caribbean Literature" *Journal of Caribbean Studies,* 5/3 (1986) pp. 131-142.

[2] See, for example, A. T. Bryan, J. E. Green, and T. M. ShawPeace, ed. *Development and Security in the Caribbean,* London, 1990; K. M. Bilby, "The Caribbean as a Musical Region", *Caribbean Contours,* Baltimore, 1985. Ian Boxhill, *Ideology and Caribbean Integration,* Mona, 1993; W. Demas, *West Indian Nationhood and Caribbean Integration,* Barbados, 1974.

[3] Estimate by F. W. Knight and C. A. Palmer, "A Regional Overview," *The Modern Caribbean,* Chapel Hill, 1989, p. 3. They note that the estimate is slightly more than the population of the seven Central American states and give also a population profile and information on the social and cultural characteristics of the region. Of course, how the region is defined depends on the purpose to be served. Knight and Palmer (pp.3ss, 16-19), indicate some of the different ways, and at a later stage in this paper I address the definition of the Caribbean region.

cohere with notions of personhood for culturally diverse groups[4] of people forming the socio-historical reality of the geographical region, and therefore is suspect. Further, *Caribbean identity* is in itself an internally incoherent expression, which appears to be intelligible in ordinary speech. Its apparent intelligibility rests on a confusion of at least two types of identity, and a misconstrual in language or category mistake. In short, the notion is problematic, much more than might be suspected on a surface inspection.

To focus sharply the contention, I pose the following simple question: Is a Caribbean identity a challenge or threat to personhood? Not easily answered, the question has at least two terms of which each has an intricate meaning complex: identity and personhood. Each of them therefore requires glossing to shed light on aspects of the meaning complex relevant to the question, and consequently to establishing plausibility for the case that an invented Caribbean identity is more a threat than a challenge. Of the two terms *personhood* is the more intricate one[5]. It is a cognate of the word *person* and refers to the quality of becoming a person. However, the concept person has a meaning complex whose core has at least two aspects. One of them is designated by the Latin *persona* (person), which is a composite of *per/sonare* meaning to sound through, as in the case of a mask through *(per)* which resounds *(sonare)* the voice of the actor. There is some doubt as to whether the origin of the word is Latin, since one view is that it is of Etruscan origin *phersu* (mask), and an other is that *phersu* is a borrowed from the Greek *prosopon* which means primarily mask, and secondarily the role played in a drama. Either way, the institution of mask is a characteristic of each of these civilizations and suggests the notion of role *(personage)*, type, or character when persona is used. That is, persona is understood as the image or mask superimposed on the individual. Among classical Greek and Latin moralists (e.g. Cicero and Panaetius), the meaning of persona takes on a moral tone, a sense of being conscious, free, and responsible. From this extended sense, the step is a short one to the juridical meaning of persona as an individual human with both legal and moral rights. This latter meaning component has in recent years become entrenched in every day speech as referral to the word *person*.

The other aspect of the meaning complex is designated also by *persona*, and signifies the human and even divine personality *(personnalité)*. The idea characterizing this aspect is that of tearing away superimposed layers. The objective is to lay bare the nature of the role-player, or to reach through to that which is one in itself *(per se una)* which is whole. That the human substance is open to the possibility of divinity is an idea that gained prominence when *persona* was used in fourth and fifth century theological controversies

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[4] For example: mulatos, mestizoes, Europeans, East Indians, Africans, Antillean Indians or native peoples, and recent arrivals. See also footnote 3, and 23.

[5] K. L. Schmitz gives a solid account of its network of meanings, especially the ambivalence between the hidden depth that the term implies and that exhibited by the term *personality*, see his "The geography of the human person," *Communio* 13 (Spring, 1986) pp. 27-48. See also *Persons*, in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, New York, 1967.

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on the three persons in the Trinity. Boethius, a theological thinker of that period, added on the idea of rationality to the formation of an indivisible and whole substance to yield our classical definition of a person. Boethius was in fact rendering in Latin terms what is expressed in Greek by Neo-platonism. Plotinus, whose name is connected with Neo-platonism, was convinced that personality as such must have its ground in a transcendent order. He provided a metaphysical foundation for the notion of person. On that foundation Christianity developed a philosophy of personality. It was then borrowed and altered by modern philosophy.

One of the accomplishments of modern philosophy is that it defined the concept of personality in accordance with psychological knowledge. Its reason for doing this was to preserve humanity's distinctive position in the face of tendencies to speak of a general uniform order in the world. Descartes, for example, emphasized human consciousness, Leibnitz placed the true essence of human personality in self-consciousness, and Kant deepened the ethical view of personality by defining it in terms of freedom and independence from the mechanism of the whole of nature. In Fichte the notion underwent further transformation to become the category of self (*moi*), which is already a primordial category in the Pietist tradition, but becomes a central category in contemporary philosophy.

The social sciences followed the lead of modern philosophy by redefining personality in terms of observable behavior and emotional tendencies. That is, personality came to have for its reference a socially perceived individual, or the organized stimulus and response characteristics of an individual dynamically involved in social situations. Hence, the concept personality came to imply an inference from behavior, and it is this meaning of the concept that gained ascendancy in ordinary language.[6] Such a meaning does not tally with, or is far removed from, that of personhood understood as the opening up of oneself to transcendence in order to become fully a self.

Different religious traditions, in addition to Christianity, tend to understand the person as consciously opening up to transcendence. Each tradition offers its adherents strategies -symbols, myths, and rituals- intended to form the human in conformity with a vision of becoming a person. The strategies are not a hodgepodge of practices -actions, utterances, and narratives- but in fact a shorthand representation of a metaphysics of the person or self. They presuppose that something is awry with human existence and has to

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[6] In cultures outside the West, *personality* as understood from a linguistic point of view does not exist, or exists in such a radically different way that it is senseless to claim any meaningful comparison. See the discussion in G. M. Erchak, *The Anthropology of Self and Behavior* New Brunswick, 1992, pp. 8ss. Erchak notes in social sciences overlapping and competing definitions of *personality* and *self*, and a shift in the use of «personality». Generally, it now comes to refer to «a more 'inner' theoretical concept, inaccessible to direct observation, whereas the 'self' is conceptualized as something *presented* to the community at large and thus accessible ... through behavior observations, autobiographical accounts and so on», and that psycho-cultural studies is now replacing it with «self». or talk of a egocentric and socio-centric selves. pp. 9, 11.

be put right or straight for a human individual to become fully a person.

To illustrate, take Islam whose population is significantly large in some countries of the Caribbean region. Its vision is informed by the Qur'án, or divine word addressed to humankind. On Qur'ánic accounts, humanity is a unique reality, created out of matter and God's own spirit. Sealed within the human breast is a covenant or mission according to which humankind took upon itself to become God's representative on earth, to create a moral social order. The Qur'án describes humankind as being unjust or foolish to volunteer for such a mission, and as tending to forget the responsibility it accepted. Qur'ánic report indicates further that the primordial nature of humankind is endowed with the ability to excel in knowledge and virtue with respect to the mission, and to act counter to its own instinctive nature. An individual, therefore, conceivably could rebel against its creature-creator relationship, could defy its own spiritual or physiological needs, or could even choose to turn away from engaging in moral struggle. For the individual to become a person, however, would mean having to sustain the creature-creator relationship through moral struggle. Tersely put, the vision is that existential remembrance of God occasions formation of personhood[7].

The Islamic religious traditions offers strategies for existentially remembering God. One set of strategies is the five pillars of Islam: *Shahadah* (repetition of the creed), *salat* (daily prayers), *zakat* (giving alms), *sawm* (fasting), and *hajj* (making the pilgrimage to Mecca). Fulfilling them prevents seduction from the straight path, or deters one from forgetting the relationship to the Creator. The Shariah or Divine Law with its injunctions are another set of strategies. Really an expansion of the five pillars, Shariah offers an ideal for human living by regulating human life to guarantee in the here now harmonious existence, and in the hereafter felicity. The life of Prophet Muhammad provides yet more strategies. It exemplifies a human form that is perfectly oriented towards divine essence or qualities by which one becomes attached to God: piety, combativeness and magnanimity. They are in effect the characteristics of personhood. Through reverencing Muhammad's specialness that makes him Exemplar or model for good conduct, a Muslim acquires moral strength to resolve the conflict between good and evil within him/her, and absorbs divine blessings. In effect, Muhammad's spiritual personality is a gateway to becoming open to transcendence, a widely and readily available instrument in the formation of personhood.

In Hinduism, whose following is much larger than Islam, the strategies are different, but the understanding of person as occasioned through realizing one's spiritual nature hardly varies. Rabindranath Tagore, artist and literary voice of modern Hinduism, articulates[8] the vision of becoming a person in this way:

> At one pole of my being I am with stocks [sic] and stones.

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[7] For a fuller treatment see my "Idea of Person With Reference to Islam," *Hamdard Islamicus* 13/4 (1990) pp. 17-29.

[8] R. Tagore, *Sadhana: The Realization of Life* Tucson, 1972, pp. 69, 79.

> There I have to acknowledge the rule of universal law. That is where
> the foundation of my existence lies.... Its strength lies in its being
> held firm ... in the fullness of its community with all things.
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> But at the other pole of my being I am separate from all.
> There I have broken through the cordon of equality and stand alone
> as an individual. I am absolutely unique, I am I, I am incomparable.

Tagore continues a few lines later:

> So we must know that the meaning of our self is not to be
> found in its separateness from God and others, but in ceaseless
> realization of *yoga*, of union; not on the side of the canvas where it
> is blank, but on the side where the picture is being painted.

An aspect of Indian thought, this vision of becoming a person is informed by *sruti* and *smirti* literature of Hinduism. It is lived out by medieval Hindu saints, recalled by Baul poets in the north of India, and passed on in the discourses of modern day sages such as Ramana Maharshi in the south. According to that vision, the human situation is also marked by ignorance that has to be overcome. Ignorance makes an individual believes that separateness of self, as in the separateness of a material object, is precious. It is, in effect, an obstruction to the human self in its becoming a full or true self on the side of the canvas where the painting of the picture is occurring.

Strategies to remove ignorance and thus ceaselessly to realize yoga or personhood can be put in one of four categories. To one category belong vedic sacrificial rituals performed to maintain the stability and welfare of the world. These strategies are available to a very small group of people. The devotional category has strategies appealing to a large number of Hindus. Devotion is directed to one of the manifestations of Brahman: Shiva, Vishnu, Rama, Krishna, or the Mahadevi in her different forms. It includes specific ritual performances which range from *pujas*, to *hawans*, to *kirtans*.

A third set of strategies are available to the few whose temperament is suited for an ascetic form of life. They include ritual actions that employ mandalas, mantras, yogic techniques, and require adept to partake of five religious pollutants associated with Trantric Hinduism. Such strategies amount to a dramatic and radical attempt to shock one into realizing the truth about the nature of selfhood, or to break free from notions and prejudices that spawn the illusion of separateness of self. A fourth set of strategies characterize folk Hinduism. It involves pilgrimages to sacred sites, treating certain plants and objects as sacred, and observing certain signs, omens, and auspicious moments that are astrological determined for life's undertaking.

It may appear that the different categories of strategies are inharmonious or impose different demands on the individual as a social being. To reconcile whatever tension their demands create, the Hindu tradition proposes a view of the human life as passing through four stages or *ashramas*. Each stage has its set of strategies or rituals for passage of the self

from one existential possibility or stage to another in its struggle to ceaselessly realize full selfhood. It is worth noting that the ashramas provide the basis for Erik Erikson's eight stages in his tracing of ego development in the human life cycle[9].

Aspects of Muslim and Hindu traditions sketched here indicate that symbols are integral to the strategies that Islam and Hinduism make available. That is, symbols play an important role in the formation of personhood. However religious symbols are strikingly distinctive in at least three ways for the purpose of this discussion. In the first place, they differ from ordinary symbols in that they represent the presence of an unconditioned transcendence in the empirical order. Their truth depends on their «inner necessity for a symbol-creating consciousness»,[10] They enable one to grasp the Unconditioned in its unconditionalness. Or, put differently, what distinguishes them from all other kinds of symbols is their power of expression and their immediacy. They speak to the soul, whether it be of the individual or the culture. Soul definitionally has a relation to a transcendent source. Conversely, one might speak of a spiritualizing tendency among humankind to interpret reality symbolically. In short, symbols are considered to have a religious potentiality. Jacques Waardenberg, scholar of religion, distinguishes between those codified by the communities concerned and considered fixed or established and those not yet sacralized and are therefore free.[11] Here, our concern is with those that are fixed.

In the second place, religious symbols have also a social dimension and function. They express values for those who are sensitive to them, and strengthen solidarities of different kind. They might play a pedagogical role, or might help to integrate different human capacities. Though closely linked to society's life, religious symbols have their own *life*, which is not the same as that of the society's. As Waardenburg notes, the social dimension of symbols is less on solidarity that they bring about and more on «the kind of people they produce by the education they provide».[12]

Thirdly, a characteristic of symbols that orient one to opening up to transcendence, is that they have a historicity or facticity for religious believers. In Islam, such symbols are few: Qur'án, Muhammad as Prophet, and Shariah, employed variously in the strategies. Of the many Hindu symbols, the primary ones are the manifestations of Brahman: Shiva, Vishnu, Rama, and Krishna. The historicity of the symbols is warranted by their ties to places or events: at Mecca or Medina in Arabia, at Ayodha, Mathura, Vrindaban in India, and so on. Consequently, they can be subjectively appropriated, or introjected by a believer

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[9] See, for example, E. H. Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* Vol. 1/1, New York, 1959

[10] *Cfr.* P. Tillich, "The Religious Symbol", *Myth And Symbol*, London, 1966, p. 29.

[11] Jacques Waardenberg, "Symbolic Aspects of Myth" *Myth, Symbol, and Reality*, Notre Dame, 1980, p. 47.

[12] *Idem*, p.46.

so as to become a part of the existential life history of who that individual is. Personhood is clearly context-sensitive in that it requires the use of specific communal symbols with a historicity or facticity. Through the use of such symbols one acquires an identity as well.

To gloss the second term, *identity*, any understanding of it is as elusive, and as dynamic, as the understanding of *person* or of *religious symbol*. It has for it core meaning the idea of sameness, at least in generic characteristics, and is generally linked to the idea of consciousness or self-awareness. In his psycho-social studies, Erik H. Erikson makes the term speaks for itself, examining it from different angles. As he notes, it «connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (selfsameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others».[13]

For the purpose of this study, a distinction[14] between two types of identity has to be observed. One type is the *fact* of identity and relates to a group situation. To speak of this type of identity relative to a group is to have in mind features that are shared by its members or marks by which a member is recognized as belonging to the group in question. In this usage, designated here as fact of identity, bodily considerations play a role: how one behaves, carries oneself, or tends to select from among the many. The emphasis is clearly on objective attributes and behavior by which a human is recognized as an individual within a collective context.

In contrast, one might speak of a sense of identity, the second type. Its emphasis is on the *how*, i.e., how one sees the world from a particular position and relative to what aspects, or how one experiences selfhood. Quite clearly, this second type of identity involves subjective and psychological matters such as memory, consciousness, a range of emotions and so on. In sense of identity, bodily considerations may play a role, but the emphasis is on the acquisition or becoming of a self out of a me. Though the two types of identity or usages are distinct, it might be claimed that an individual develops sense of identity (second type) through social practices, and that social practices are tied to the fact of identity (first type). However, sense of identity depends largely on an inner psychological reordering, an experiential transcendence or oneness that underscores the quality of awareness of the social practices in which one is engaged. It is symbols of transcendence, embedded in certain social practices, that unify the psyche and occasion the quality of awareness correlating with sense of identity[15]. The relation between sense and practice that obtains for religious symbols might be understood on the analogy of the relation that obtains for self-worth. That is, self-worth or how one feels about oneself, depends more on ego-strengths and their unity than on mere participation in or exclusion

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[13] Erik H. Erikson, "The Problem of Ego Identity," *Identity and the Life Cycle*, New York, 1950, p. 102.

[14] This distinction is borrowed from Rom Harré, *Personal Being*, 1984, pp. 203ss.

[15] This position intimates insights by Erik Erikson or by Robert Jay Lifton, *The Life Of The Self*, New York, 1976, p. 145.

from social practices.

To speak about acquiring identity through symbols of religious traditions is to refer to both types of identity. To talk, however, about Caribbean identity or any national cultural identity for that matter, is to refer to fact identity (first type) and not necessarily sense identity (second type). As the contemporary discourse indicates, the fact of identity implies approval and endorsement of a historical and ethnic experience at the center, from which flows the social and political power; further, the endorsement does not accommodate at the center the experiences of diverse cultural groups or ones with different symbols mentioned earlier. More specifically, it sees as the claimant for the center the experience of a single «numerical majority»[16] described by observable attributes: musical and dance forms, creole languages. It does not consider the subjective factor or the sense of identity relative to actualizing personhood according to groups with different religious symbols. In short, there is no evidence that the espoused Caribbean identity correlates with specific symbols reflective of a metaphysics of self or related to becoming a person.

Further, in the idiom *Caribbean identity*, the referent for the designator *Caribbean* is ordinarily ambiguous. We find at least three separate conceptions[17] of the Caribbean: 1) the English speaking Caribbean, 2) the Caribbean archipelago and mainland extensions in South America and Central America, and 3) the Caribbean basin - a geopolitical concept that spans countries in the archipelago and littoral nations of Central and South America. The discourse promoting Caribbean identity, however, implies as its intended referent the English speaking Caribbean primarily. By this intention, talk of Caribbean identity becomes problematic in a threefold way: a) it precludes linguistically and culturally diverse peoples from sharing the center stage of the socio-political life it envisions for the Caribbean, b) it implies a totality constituted by a single numerical majority of the region and in the direction of one cultural group as a diaspora people, and c) it marginalizes even those from the creole colour-class stratification that do not share in the experience of colonial oppression. Clearly, the Caribbean identity espoused by the literature is an invented one. It is unrepresentative of the multi-faceted Caribbean ethos, and culturally marginalizes

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[16] Nettleford claims that the African descendants are a unifying cultural influence Caribbean wide and constitute a *numerical majority, Inward Stretch*, p. 179, *cfr.* pp. 128, xii. That formulation of African descendants as a numerical majority along with expressions such as *East Indian variable*, and *struggle of the African presence* suggest that his is a discourse of race or ethnicity. For forms of observable attributes: language, dance, and music see also pp. 84-88.

[17] See: W. G. Demas forward to *The Restless Caribbean* R. Millet and W. Marvin Will eds., New York, 1979, p. vii; Frank Moya Pons, "Is There a Caribbean Consciousness?" *Américas*, 3/8 (1979) pp. 33-36. Definitions of the region with its nearly 30 million inhabitants is taken up by F. W. Knight and C. A. Palmer,"The Caribbean: A Regional Overview," in the text edited by them *The Modern Caribbean* ,Chapel Hill, 1989, pp. 3, 19. They indicate that the most conventional definition refers to the islands spanning Bahamas to Trinidad and include Belize, Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana.

those who do not share in the power to generate the knowledge and requisite material productions necessary to energize or re-vitalize their cultural life.

The two key terms clarified, we might now better perceive how the imagined and eulogized Caribbean identity is a threat to personhood. Simply put, it presumes a cultural center that is definable by the experience of the single numerical majority and occupiable through a hegemonic move.[18] Such a move is in effect a threat to culturally diverse peoples whose sense of identity involves symbols that are different from those whose class interests are to dominate and to become an emblem for the region. Hindus and Muslims in the Caribbean form two large groups that are culturally diverse, even though to outsiders the two may seem to be ethnically homogenous —similar aesthetic tastes, consumer habits, historical origins and disaporic experiences—. In fact, each as a socio-religious community is sensitive to a different set of symbols that determine the values it wishes to transmit from one generation to the next and thus that define for its members their sense of identity communally and individually. To foist on them an imagined identity, or one proffered as shaped in the crucible of experience of one cultural group amounts to cultural hegemony.

Not race, but cultural hegemony is the problematic factor that is implicit in the imperative of the eulogized Caribbean identity. It affects not just Muslim and Hindu communities, but also the Christian community with its missionary zeal. This latter community, another source of input to the region's cultural texture, expresses its ideals in the form of western or European values and social practices. Though it counts among its adherents a large percentage with African ancestry, its religious outlook no more provides, it seems, a framework than Islam or Hinduism for the desired Caribbean identity. Its outlook too will have to give way, in the contrived geopolitical cultural identity formation, to an outlook that is reflective of *the people from below*, and proffered by Rastafarianism.[19]. Christianity as a form of socio-cultural interaction is therefore subject to displacement, even though it defines itself differently. It draws on a different network of symbols related to making human life bearable, and has a different cultural matrix and history from the traditions of Islam and Hinduism in the Caribbean. Though constitutive of Caribbean ethos, these three religions represent diverse cultural worlds.

Cultural worlds are popularly depicted by consumer habits and preferential tastes: ethnic food, music, pictures, and ancestral costumes. These represent, however, only the material aspect of the foundation from which such worlds are constructed. Integral to their foundation is a psycho-social aspect[20] as well. A more adequate depiction, one that spans both aspects, is rendered in terms of religion, language, and customs. These three are

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[18] Nettleford subtly hints at Rastafarians and their philosophy as providing the ontological underpinnings for the artistic manifestations of such an identity. *op.cit.*, p. 125.

[19] Nettleford, *op. cit.*, pp. 125s, 168.

[20] Erchak speaks of culture as having a tripartite foundation: material, mental, and social. I have collapsed the latter two into one for brevity: psycho-social. Erchak, *op. cit*, pp. 3ss.

developed to express natural impulses in a way that would maximize adaptation to the environment, materially and socially, for a satisfying life. They provide a framework for orienting behavior, thought, and feelings, or for resisting disorder. But the framework has to be appropriated subjectively, internalized by individuals, such that they become more self-conscious and reflective about how they live and think. In this way individuals begin to acquire the sense of identity. Put differently, the sense of identity involves meanings, expectations and understanding in which they find themselves or form their personhood. The subjective appropriation by which personhood is formed occurs at the inward level of one's being and correlates with employment of symbols in the sphere of religion.

By religion the intended reference here is less to institutional forms, local rites, and images or artifacts made hallow through supposedly divine sanction. As a form of praxis, religion runs the risk of harboring idolatry, of accumulating cultural accretions that are extraneous to the opening up of oneself to transcendence or that are deleterious to the fabric of society. Accretions can reach a level at which reform within a religious tradition has to be undertaken. Reformers are in general adherents with ability to make judgements about the relationships of practices to larger aggregates of practices that characterize a religious tradition. Illustrations of this happening are the Wahabbi movement and the reconstructions of Muhammad Iqbal in Islam, the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj movements in Hinduism, and Protestantism in European Christianity.

The proper reference to religion, therefore, is less to cultural forms and more to symbols. Specifically, it is to symbols of transcendence codified by traditions of a religious community and correlated with rituals and explanatory myths. In fact, each religion presents a view of the satisfying human life in the form of an algebra of symbols, rituals, and myths as received commentaries. The algebra is characterized further by a specific personalistic note or subjectivity. Rabindranath Tagore strikes that note in the following remark: «Gladness is the one criterion of truth, and we know when we have touched truth by the music it gives, by the joy of greeting it sends forth to the truth in us. This is the true foundation of all religions».[21] Itself a custom or practice, the algebra of symbols to a greater extent than history becomes important for peoples that lack a common state or constitution. Caribbean peoples clearly constitute such an example. The Caribbean is not a single nation-state. At best, it is a cluster of nation-states that have culturally diverse groups of people. To take Caribbean identity as privileging the historical experience of a single numerical majority as a national cultural status, or even as a badge of where one originally hails from, is selectively to appropriate the inheritance of one ethnic group and thereby to exclude that of groups integral to the region's cultural matrix. Excluding other groups is part of a tradition of pigmentocracy[22] that belongs to Caribbean history and that appears even among

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[21] R. Tagore, *The Religion of Man*, Boston, 1966, p. 107.

[22] In the latter part of the 19th century emerged a group of Afro-West Indian intellectuals. According to Roberto Marquez "Emergence of a Caribbean Literature", *The Modern Caribbean, op. cit.*, they saw themselves as representing the legitimate national majority which they identified with

the immigrant population from the Caribbean in Canada. According to a recent ethnographic study, Caribbean diasporic identities in Toronto have become increasingly politicized around issues related to black representations... in the media, in school curricula... These new identities also attempt to universalize blackness.[23]

Whether in Toronto or the Caribbean, the privileging or selectivity is a form of politicizing that strikes at the heart of personhood formation, that amounts to a concocting of algebra that is unrepresentative of regional cultural diversity, and that is one step removed from the claim of right to rule in some nation-states.

Any proposal for a Caribbean identity would have to accommodate as much as possible the experiences of all who make up the cultural chiaroscuro -from the Antillean Indians to the latecomers[24] of the Caribbean region. This would not lessen the difficulty implicit in constructing such an identity,[25] since the taxing question for each cultural group would then be, if it is not already the case, which patches of experiences, symbols, and practices are most representative of who they are, or how they have become who they are. Such a question has, however, the merit of challenging some religio-cultural practices presumed to be strategies when in fact they burden or stifle the formation of personhood. The challenge, in effect, calls for a critical re-examination of communal judgments regarding the appropriate contextual use of certain symbols and strategies (when to use/do what publicly or communally). It might even force a rethinking of the idea of identity as an explanatory cultural category in delimiting those who populate the Caribbean region. Not all the peoples share the lived experience shaped by a blue sea with corals and

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the creole descendants of slaves, in the «struggle to advance their own alternatives in the assumption of white supremacy». p. 304. The sensitivity to pigmentation became one of the thematic foci of *négritude* for post-war Caribbean writers, among whom are C. L. R. James, Austin Clarke. It emerged as a leitmotif also for those Hispanic and Francophone writers of the region engaged in undermining a Euro-centric cultural perspective.

[23] Daniel Yon, "Identity and Differences in the Caribbean Diaspora: Case Study from Metropolitan Toronto" *The Reording of Culture*, Ottawa 1995, p. 492.

[24] Some groups arrived as neither colonial adventurers or outcasts, nor slaves, nor indentured workers. Arabs, for example, constitute one such group. Their arrival which began in the 1860's became a major flow thirty years later. They are predominant in countries such as Jamaica, Dominican Republic, and Haiti, making significant contributions to the economic, social and political life of the Caribbean region. See: David Nicholls, "Arabs In The Greater Antilles" *Caribbean Societies, vol.* 2, London, 1985.

[25] This is not the same as a trans-Caribbean identity, which Ralph Premdas sees as «the highest form of nationalist fantasy», in his typology of Caribbean identities. As he notes, a trans-Caribbean identity does not exist in reality. Premdas, *op. cit.*, pp. 79s. An identity that incorporates patches of all different cultural experiences might also not exist, but constructing one might be a heuristic exercises for culturally diverse groups occupying the region.

shipwrecks, or by mountains, valleys, and hurricane seasons. Geography, land-mass, and environmental conditions can also have an impact on vision of life, dispositions, and traits -on the fact of identity.

Finally, a misleading analogy or category mistake creates an impression that the idiom *Caribbean identity*, is conceptually meaningful. Considered as a linguistic form, *Caribbean identity* is by itself conceptually unclear and lacking conventional use. To see that this is in fact so, the temptation has to be resisted to treat it on the model of idioms that have concrete referents or count nouns: Caribbean islands, Caribbean leaders, or Caribbean products. The reason is that as an abstract noun, *identity* is a category of quality or whatness to which no spatial or regional position is ordinarily assigned. When modified by *Caribbean* it yields a form of idiom that appears to belong to the same logical type as those either with count nouns just mentioned or with certain abstract nouns found in idioms such as *American citizenship, British nationality, Canadian experience.* The logical behavior of each of the three —citizenship, nationality, experience— in the forms just mentioned is circumscribed by indisputably clear or concrete ideas related to public policy development and practices, especially to making forecasts and determining trends.

In the case of *Caribbean identity*, its logical behavior based on its use is very different. As this essay alludes, its use in recent literary discourse is choreographed to introduce a cluster of ideas related to neutralizing African denigration. Central to the cluster is the idea of privileging the socio-historical experience of one ethnic group and by implication marginalizing the experience of the others in the Caribbean. The choreographing canvases the experience of that group as the cultural emblem of the Caribbean region. The behavior of the idiom is stipulative: to facilitate ethno-cultural domination. That usage notwithstanding, *Caribbean identity* remains internally incoherent, is linguistic nonsense in the guise of sense. It opens in the mind no new possibility for self-renewal or human dignity, perhaps because the term *Caribbean* is a positional reference to a particular land mass that has people of many cultures, and not a reference to nationality, ethnicity, or culture.

In summary, the Caribbean identity espoused by contemporary literature is problematic on five counts. 1) It correlates with no network of symbols to raise questions about meaning of life and to provide answers. It is not an algebra for a satisfying human life. 2) It does not accommodate various strategies for the formation of personhood associated with different religious communities, and understood as opening up of oneself to transcendence. In that respect, it is a threat to the formation of personhood, religiously understood. 3) It refers primarily to an experience forged in the crucible of selective memories of a single numerical majority in the region. It, therefore, implicitly nationalizes the experience of one cultural group and consequently marginalizes the history of other cultural groups that share the same geographical space. Put differently, it assumes that the

cultural chiaroscuro of the Caribbean has a hegemonic center that rightfully belongs to a particular ethnic group. 4) It is more likely to be a source of conflict instead of a source of inspiration to rethink judgements about appropriate contextual use of symbols and strategies in relation to identity and personhood formation. And, 5) its apparent meaning rests on a category mistake which once exposed makes the purported idea of Caribbean identity an *internally incoherent one.*