

Bridging the Secular Divide:
Religion and Canadian Public Discourse

Comblér le fossé laïque:
La religion et le discours public au Canada



Closing remarks - May 28, 2013

The Rev. Dr. Karen Hamilton
General Secretary
The Canadian Council of Churches

"Faire avancer la conversation sur la religion et le discours public canadien."...

It is my role as the closing speaker at this inaugural conference – Bridging the Secular Divide: Religion and Canadian Public Discourse – to articulate whether we have met the goals of the conference, as set out in the framework document, to sum up the content and discussion of the conference and to point forward to the future and further directions, and to do all of this in fifteen minutes without speaking so quickly as to drive our wonderful translators crazy.

The best course when confronted with an impossible task such as this is to begin with a story....

The very same daughter that Dean Aitken spoke about in introducing me, my daughter who was a graduate of this faculty, has been known to say of me, on more than one occasion, that I have more technology in my life than I am competent to handle. You will have noted, however, that I did manage to find the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi with which I lead the Christian devotions of our time together yesterday on my iPhone!

The joys of an iPhone mean that I can download podcasts to listen to on my way to work in the mornings. The ever-astute Geoff Cameron, one of my co-conspirators in the organizing of this conference, knows this and last fall introduced me to the CBC series, 'The Myth of the Secular'. I managed to download the whole series and listen to them last fall. In preparation for this conference, I thought it would be a good idea to listen to that very excellent series again. But after much searching for them on my phone and my laptop, I discovered that either of those pieces of technology and/or the CBC are more clever than I and that after six months, such downloaded podcasts are automatically erased. In my search for them, however, I turned up something else – a CBC panel critiquing the series 'The Myth of the Secular'.

At first I thought I wouldn't listen to it. After all, it might not be helpful to the knowledge base I was trying to build on the subject of this conference and I really was not at all sure that I wanted to hear the ideas of a series I had found very engaging and reinforcing of my own ideas, critiqued. Ah, but is that not exactly what we were intending to be about in 'Bridging the Secular Divide', deep dialogue on the role of religion in Canadian public discourse, from differing points of view?

I found the panel facile, an odd and rather random combination of facts, figures and opinions. The panelists clearly had not liked the series 'The Myth of the Secular', had not understood it and had not engaged it in any depth. They were definitely speaking from a place of militant secularism, from a notion of secularism that refuses to want any space for religion, any religion, in public discourse. They found the series and religion in general to be facile and an odd and rather random combination of facts, figures and opinions. They thought that the series had not understood secularism and had not really engaged it in any depth.

Ah, but that is why we are here these two days at McGill. That is why this conference was conceived. That is why we are talking and need to continue talking and expand the circle of partners with whom we are talking.

The depth and breath of these last two days and wonderful plethora of speakers who have engaged us means that you know as well as I do that my concluding remarks on whether we have achieved our purpose, summing up what has been said and presenting future directions are going to be shamelessly selective. But I hope that by the end of my brief remarks, you will, at least, think that we were at the same conference!

So did this inaugural 'Bridging the Secular Divide' conference achieve its aims, aspiring to advance an on-going conversation about a constructive and positive role for religion in Canadian society, fostering a new spirit of civility and reconciliation, speaking openly about our beliefs, values and principles and how they relate to the common good, where neither belief nor unbelief are privileged? Yes. So is there much further to go in this conversation? Also, yes.

As I delve into what those further directions might look like, I am going to divide my comments into two categories – definitions and actions.

To begin with the definitions...We have been pushing ourselves and our secular society on the very definition of 'secular'. We have even developed a very visual, colourful image for our definition of 'secular', seeing the frame of the gorgeous stained glass window in this McGill chapel as a representation of a secularism that contains within it all the wondrously colourful and diverse realities that are our faith traditions. But we cannot stop here. We need to take our definition forward and engage our 'secular' colleagues and society with it. How does our definition work or not work in a wider, broader context?

We have also spoken frequently in the last two days about 'Canadian values' and we have done some work at defining what those are but much more definition is needed, along side of the question of whom it is in our society that gets to define them and for who?

We have also spoken about the 'common good'. Much more discussion is needed in the defining of what this is and what it looks like for individuals, for diversity, for society, for the world. And we also need to recognize that justified or not, faith groups can and have been perceived as being less interested in the common good than in what is good for them. What can we do, what must we do to change that perception? Related to this is the fact that religion often talks about the deep and long standing wisdom that we bring to the issues of our society. We have spoken in that kind of language throughout this conference. We need to work at being much more specific and concrete about what that wisdom really is and what it brings to the issues before us all.

One of our speakers, James Christie, reminded us that there is a difference, a big difference between pluralism and relativism. Another set of definitions that require our attention.

We also heard that in many conversations about the role of religion in Canadian public discourse, too often 'victimization' is at play and that there can even be a competition of victimizations. How will we work to both define this reality more precisely and move beyond it?

Moving into my second category of actions, there is a challenge that has been present as an undercurrent throughout this conference. It has been my experience that there are places in our secular society, particularly when secularity is being understood as something that includes all religions, where people of faith can present a consensus, where we can focus on an issue or issues as people of faith together and be heard and taken seriously. It is much harder currently to present a diversity of opinions on any given issues and be heard or taken seriously by those parts of our society that might self define as secular.

There has been lots of emphasis in these two days of presentations, responses and questions on 'civility'. Every time 'civility' and the necessity for it in these kinds of conversations gets mentioned, we all nod along because, really, who does not like 'civility'? As we go forward, however, we need to recognize with much more intentionality that there are many, many places both around the world and in this country where not only is civility not present but where people believe passionately that civility is not the best way forward, not in the best interests of either individuals or society. How will we engage that perspective?

Also of importance as we take this vital conversation forward are a number of points made briefly by some of our speakers, points that challenge us and have huge scope in defining our actions. Daniel Weinstock reminded us that there are not nearly enough people who are active in public discourse. Bruce Clemenger pointed to the fact that many who engage freely and willingly in dialogue as adults, had that modeled for them as children. It was also strongly said that we must all make every effort not to give offense but that equally we must make every effort not to take offense.

A final, very concrete remark in a series of remarks that have been as I warned, shamelessly selective but, I hope, illustrative of what we tried planned to accomplish here, what we actually accomplished and what lies before us for our next and next iterations of this crucial conversation. This 'Bridging the Secular Divide' conference has been graced by the presence of one current and two former ambassadors. A feature of Canadian public discourse upon which we can all draw is the global experience of our ambassadors and diplomats. They have lived and worked in many regions of the world and engaged in the religious and/or secular context of those regions. What if we were to envision a future gathering of this resource as a way of continuing to 'Bridge the Secular Divide'?

Have we accomplished what we set out to in this conference? Yes.

Do we have much further to go in a conversation that we believe is of benefit to all Canadians? Also, yes.

Mes amis...Allons-y!